

Diachronic Approaches to Modality in World Englishes

Introduction to the Special Issue

Dirk Noël

The University of Hong Kong, P.R. China

Bertus van Rooy

North-West University, South Africa

Johan van der Auwera

University of Antwerp, Belgium

The collection of papers presented in this special issue of the *Journal of English Linguistics* is the first of its kind as a thematically and methodologically coherent set of contributions dealing with the diachronic dimension of the grammar of postcolonial varieties of English. To date, the bulk of descriptive World Englishes research has consisted of synchronic comparisons of the lexicogrammar of the parent variety and postcolonial Englishes, often accounting for the present-day differences in contact linguistic and language acquisitional terms, or with reference to certain “universals of New Englishes” or “angloversals” (Mair 2003). Barring a number of forerunners (like Fritz 2007, Dollinger 2008, Hundt & Szmrecsanyi 2012, Rossouw & Van Rooy 2012), the grammars of contemporary postcolonial varieties have not been considered from a historical linguistic perspective, as stages in their own evolution. Indeed, such a research focus remains unmentioned in Bolton’s (2005) survey article on World Englishes research. Nor is historical linguistics mentioned by Schneider (2003: 236) as one of the linguistic subdisciplines that the study of “world-wide Englishes” builds on, in spite of the fact that it “should [...] be most obvious” that “the sociolinguistic and linguistic scenarios in which New Englishes have evolved lend themselves to an investigation of [...] language variation and change” (Schneider 2003: 238).

While the historical investigation of any sociocultural phenomenon is hardly in need of further justification, the arrival on the scene of World Englishes scholarship of Schneider’s (2003) own “dynamic model” of the emergence of New Englishes has made the need for the historical linguistic investigation of such varieties all the more pressing. As a hypothesis of a “diachronic process” (Schneider 2003: 235), it very much remains in need of empirical underpinning, in particular with relation to any grammatical changes claimed to be associated with it. Specifically, as Schneider (2007: 49-50) notes, by Stage 3 of his dynamic model, “nativization” is expected to take place, which results in the adoption of endogenous changes to English in the new postcolonial environment. This should result on the one hand in divergence from the parent variety (British English in most cases, but American English in the case of one of the varieties discussed in this issue, Philippine English), but also in convergence between the Englishes of the settler descendants and the indigenous people (Schneider 2007: 31). Both these developments can best be investigated with historical data, rather than synchronic comparisons alone.

The general unavailability thus far of ready-made diachronic corpora of postcolonial varieties is probably both cause and effect of the existing research gap. The compilation of such corpora has only just got underway for a couple of these varieties. The idea for an “International Historical Corpus of Post-Colonial Varieties of English” has been raised, but only the compilation of a Singaporean component, IHCPV-Singapore, has started so far (Hoffman 2010). Only two of the contributions to this special issue, which all make use of diachronic corpus data, could fall back on

corpora which were not specifically put together for the purpose of the research reported on here, viz. the contribution by Collins on Australian English, which includes data from the “Corpus of Oz Early English” (COOEE), which was specially compiled for Fritz’s (2007) study, covering the 19th century, and the one on Philippine English by Collins, Borlongan & Yao, which uses data from the “Phil-Brown” corpus, a corpus of Philippine English modelled after the Brown corpus of American English with data sampled from the late 1950s-early 1960s.

All of the contributions to this collection of papers deal with aspects of the development of the modal verbal domain in the varieties they concentrate on. This choice of focus is not without reason. Of late, recent changes in the modal systems of the two dominant metropolitan varieties, British English and American English, have received a lot of attention, most notably from Geoffrey Leech and a number of collaborators, culminating in two chapters in Leech et al. (2009). This research, which starts from a comparison of the Brown family corpora, observed that a general decline in the frequency of modal auxiliaries and a concomitant increase in the frequency of “quasi-modal” verbal expressions has taken place in both British and American English during the second half of the 20th century, the latter variety having advanced the most on both counts. Very recently, Leech (forthcoming) extended the time frame of this research to the beginning of the 21st century. Interesting questions following on from this research are whether postcolonial varieties that can be traced back to either the one or the other of these dominant metropolitan varieties are displaying similar developments, whether a difference can be observed in this respect between native and non-native varieties, and whether the details of the frequency development of modals and quasi-modals in specific postcolonial varieties can be related to the “phases” of Schneider’s dynamic model. These questions are at the very least implicitly addressed in all the contributions to this issue.

Peter Collins had already addressed such questions in earlier research (Collins 2009a,b), though not on the basis of sets of monitor corpora like the Brown family corpora used in the research of Leech and his associates, nor on the basis of diachronic corpora, because neither were available at the time for any of the varieties he considered. Instead, he drew diachronic conclusions from comparisons of frequencies in the written and spoken parts of various component corpora of the International Corpus of English (ICE). Van der Auwera, Noël & De Wit (2012) have provided additional empirical support for the validity of basing hypotheses on the grammatical evolution of languages on such comparisons, but needless to say that the more direct evidence provided by historical corpora is more reliable. The four diachronic corpus-based studies contained in this issue therefore provide a necessary complement to Collins’ pioneering research.

Two of the studies compiled here restrict their diachronic perspective to the time span covered in the research by Leech and his associates (Collins, Borlongan & Yao; Van Rooy & Wasserman), while the other two expand their scope to the 19th century (Collins; Wasserman & Van Rooy). The latter two papers consequently extend the diachronic corpus-based investigation of grammatical change during the Late Modern English period, which has so far been restricted to developments in British and American English, to non-metropolitan varieties of English.

The contributions to this collection complement each other very nicely in that two of the articles are about native varieties of English, viz. Australian English (Collins) and White South African English (Wasserman & Van Rooy), while the other two deal with (largely) non-native varieties, viz. Philippine English (Collins, Borlongan & Yao) and Black South African English (Van Rooy & Wasserman). All

these studies consider the question of divergence from their parent variety quite explicitly. What is doubly interesting about this collection, however, is that it contains two papers (by Van Rooy and Wasserman) which together cover quite a unique situation in the area of World Englishes, namely the presence of two different postcolonial varieties, one predominantly native and the other predominantly non-native, in one and the same country, viz. South Africa. These two studies enable an investigation of convergence between strands *within* a national context, to cover the second of the diachronic entailments of Schneider's dynamic model.

We will stop short of saying much more about the contents of the individual contributions here, given that each of them is introduced by an abstract. The only thing that remains to be explained perhaps is the order in which they are presented. It seemed most logical to arrange them in a centrifugal fashion, moving from the "Inner Circle" of Kachru's (1985) concentric circle model to the "Outer Circle", and grouping the two South African papers in the middle. The first study in the collection is the paper by Collins on Australian English, a variety that is quite typical of an Inner Circle variety, and of all the varieties covered in the collection the one that has advanced the furthest along the stages of Schneider's dynamic model. This is followed by the other investigation of a native variety, White South African English (Wasserman & Van Rooy), which has not progressed as far as Australian English, and which has had much more contact with other languages than Australian English. Next, the first non-native variety, Black South African English (Van Rooy & Wasserman) is presented, including a direct comparison to its counterpart in the colonial contact situation. The final paper introduces the more typical Outer Circle variety of Philippine English (Collins, Borlongan & Yao), comparing it to its historical input variety, American English. This sequence of presentation also follows the order of the time depth of the varieties covered and their likely progression along the scale of the dynamic model.

References

- Bolton, Kingsley. 2005. Where WE stands: Approaches, issues and debate in world Englishes. *World Englishes* 24(1). 69-83.
- Collins, Peter. 2009a. *Modals and quasi-modals in English*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Collins, Peter. 2009b. Modals and quasi-modals in world Englishes. *World Englishes* 28(3). 281-292.
- Dollinger, Stefan. 2008. *New-dialect formation in Canada: Evidence from the English modal auxiliaries*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Fritz, Clemens W.A. 2007. *From English in Australia to Australian English 1788-1900*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Hoffman, Sebastian. 2010. Towards an International Historical Corpus of Post-Colonial Varieties of English. Poster presented at the 31st ICAME conference, Giessen, Germany.
- Hundt, Marianne & Benedikt Szmrecsanyi. 2012. Animacy in early New Zealand English. *English World-Wide* 33(3). 241-263.
- Kachru, Braj B. 1985. Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the Outer Circle. In Randolph Quirk & Henry G. Widdowson (eds.), *English in the world: Teaching the language and the literatures*, 11-30. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Leech, Geoffrey. Forthcoming. Where have all the modals gone? An essay on the declining frequency of core modal auxiliaries in recent standard English. In Juana I. Marín-Arrese, Marta Carretero Lapeyre, Jorge Arús Hita & Johan van der Auwera (eds.), *English modality: Core, periphery and evidentiality*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Leech, Geoffrey, Marianne Hundt, Christian Mair & Nicholas Smith. 2009. *Change in contemporary English: A grammatical study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mair, Christian. 2003. Kreolismen und verbales Identitätsmanagement im geschriebenen jamaikanischen Englisch. In Elisabeth Vogel, Antonia Napp & Wolfgang Lutterer (eds.), *Zwischen Ausgrenzung und Hybridisierung*, 79-96. Würzburg: Ergon.
- Rossouw, Ronel & Bertus van Rooy. 2012. Diachronic changes in modality in South African English. *English World-Wide*. 33(1). 1-26.
- Schneider, Edgar W. 2003. The dynamics of new Englishes: From identity construction to dialect birth. *Language* 79(2). 233-281.
- Schneider, Edgar W. 2007. *Postcolonial English: Varieties around the world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- van der Auwera, Johan, Dirk Noël & Astrid De Wit. 2012. The diverging *need (to)*'s of Asian Englishes. In Marianne Hundt & Ulrike Gut (eds.), *Mapping unity and diversity world-wide: Corpus-based studies of New Englishes*, 55-75. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.