

Is it Mispronunciation or Different Mispronunciation?:
Analyzing Problems with English Spelling Reform in the
Context of Globalization

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I. Spelling Reform and the Development of World Englishes

English in the 21st century is an unprecedented phenomenon, where a language is universally spoken across the globe. According to a table on the WorldData.info website (2020b), English is the official language of 38 countries belonging to North America, Europe, Oceania, Caribbean, Asia, and Africa. It also indicates that English is partly spoken as mother tongue in 19 other countries, which marks English the first place among the ranks of geographical distribution of languages worldwide with a total distribution of 57 countries. (2020a) Moreover, in "Geography of world languages", R. Adam Dastrup, (2015) reports that the population using English as a second language is 500 million. In addition, another WorldData.info website article ("English speaking countries", 2020b) states the fact that English is the most widely spoken language when second and school languages are taken into account. Given the fact that even countries which recognize English as a foreign language also implement policies to designate essential English education at the national level, it is undeniable that English nowadays is truly the dominant global language.

While it is unquestionable that English has established the supremacy as the dominant global language of today, Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable (2012) write that English language has struggled with irregularity in its spelling for over 400 years (p. 325). This is mostly because English has a long history of importing extensive loanwords which have derived from other languages throughout the history (Baugh

& Cable, p. 9). Due to its confusing spelling variation, English orthography has a low degree of correspondence between written symbols and phonemes of the language, which makes English pronunciation hardly predictable.

Specifically, Donald G. Scragg (2014) notes that two contrasting approaches to English spelling have dominated the ongoing controversial issues of English spelling reform (p. 141). He writes that one approach seeks to introduce a phonetic spelling system in which each sound is represented by one letter. According to Scragg, it is based on the belief that English spelling system should be reformed to the extent that it perfectly represents all sounds of English. In contrast, the other approach disagrees with the view that English should be deviated from the traditional orthography, which generally reflects the etymology of a word (Scragg, p. 141).

In particular, advocates of English spelling reform through the introduction of phonetic spelling system have manifested new interest in the problem of English spelling, which reflects the desire to stabilize English as a lingua franca in a globalized world. As an illustration, in "English spelling reform", James B. Carter (2006) has offered harsh critiques that English orthography is capricious, asserting that it is necessary to adopt new spelling on a phonetic basis in order to make English pronunciation fully predictable (p. 83). Basically, he is warning that the systematically disordered English spelling is constantly exposing speakers to the danger of producing wrong pronunciation of English when communicating in English, thereby jeopardizing the current position of English as a language of

international communication (p. 84). Similarly, Du Young Chun (2015) argues that inconsistency between spelling and pronunciation in English is a crucial impediment for English to meet its full potential as the language of international communication (p. 3).

Likewise, a recent movement for spelling reform promotes a seemingly ideal state of defining one correct pronunciation for every single word. However, it overlooks what I consider an important point about the ideology of standardization as an oppressive force in a global scale. Considering the single hegemonic power of the U.S. exercised in a global scale, I think there should be concern that such a dominating power is most likely to be influential in deciding what a standard pronunciation is, and in setting the rules for spelling reform. As a result, the approach to standardize English pronunciation and spelling with phonetic spelling system is likely to reinforce cultural hegemony that marginalizes regional variations of English language.

Furthermore, it is likely that phonetic approach to spelling reform will result in violating the rights of speakers who use various dialects of English worldwide. It is notable that contemporary English has multiplied into varieties of indigenized Englishes outside of the U.S. and the UK, referred to as world Englishes, throughout the colonial period of expansion and the postindustrial world. Jennifer Jenkins (2009) states that "there is also much that is unique to each variety of world Englishes, particularly in terms of their accents, but also in their idiomatic uses of vocabulary, their grammars, and their discourse strategies" (p. 9). The essence of Jenkins's

argument is that acculturation of English worldwide, gives prominence to particular local linguistic features and cultures of various speech communities in the world. By extension, Yamuna Kachru and Larry E. Smith (2008) suggest a paradigm shift of English language to be embracing variation and cultural pluralism in a globalized world (p. 4). I support the study of world Englishes in the context of globalization because it is basically criticizing the homogenizing influence on contemporary English development by the global cultural dominance of the U.S. and the UK, whose English has been accepted as the prestigious, standard English in the world. This is a point that needs emphasizing since so many people, including advocates of phonetic spelling in English believe that such regional variations of English are corruptions of English language.

Emily Brown Coolidge Toker (2012) complicates matters further when she writes that expanding the concept of agency and ownership to other groups of people is crucial for English to truly serve its role as a global lingua franca (p. 113). I agree that giving respect to diverse sociocultural factors of speakers develops an idea that English speakers share equal rights in the use of English in both colloquial and written discourse.

In the context of contemporary English development, I will focus on the suitability and feasibility of a demand for phonetic spelling system of English in this age of globalization. My view is that such a standardizing influence of spelling reform on a phonetic basis is a potential risk of cultural invasion by U.S. power. Instead, it is necessary to respect various English speakers' rights by embracing

novelty in pronunciation and orthography in order for English to achieve qualification as a tool of international communication to connect people in international society as the language of a true global communication. However, this is not to say that English should be pronounced and spelled chaotically. Rather, it can be observed that the various pronunciation of world Englishes respectively displays consistent rules to the extent that they can be recognized as legitimate regional variations, equivalent to that of the historically English-speaking countries. Moreover, a worldwide phenomenon of English pronunciation to reflect its conventional spelling shows a tendency of English speakers to stay with traditional attitudes towards spelling. Accordingly, I think the present-day standard of English spelling, which reflects regional origins of a word rather than its pronunciation, is more useful for learning English as it conforms to the needs of speakers.

My conclusion, then, is that the traditional etymological approach to English spelling is better than phonetic spelling system for protecting the rights of various speakers of English worldwide. Ultimately, what is at stake here is accepting diverse features of world Englishes in a globalized world to the extent that English sustain its international practice as a global language. Seeing how the claim of spelling reform of English language on a phonetic basis loses validity helps us understand that accepting the coexistence of various English use worldwide defends diversity in a globalized world.

II. Standardizing Influence of Phonetic Spelling System

Advocates of phonetic spelling system consider regional differences of English pronunciation to be deficient, disqualifying English as a medium of mutual communication. Carter writes, "having a broadly standard pronunciation of 'standard' English based on a logical and consistent system of spelling would be particularly helpful worldwide in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language" (p. 85). Basically, spelling reform on phonetic basis rests upon the questionable assumption that spelling-to-sound relationship of English should be consistent and even permanent, having a unified method of pronunciation. In other words, spelling reform ultimately seeks to fix English pronunciation. I think this raises a concern that only a single set of pronunciation might be recognized as a valid English, thereby imposing a standardized form of English on both spoken and written discourse. Consequently, phonetic spelling system is likely to reinforce cultural hegemony that disqualifies regional variations of English. Such an approach towards spelling reform is incompatible with contemporary English development, which shows historical and linguistic evidence that speakers of various dialects of English worldwide also have rights as legitimate norm generators.

A. Potential Risk of Cultural Invasion by U.S. Power

In my view, it is highly likely that a global cultural dominance of the U.S. may be exerted in establishing the standard form of English pronunciation, which is

most likely to be influential in setting the rules for phonetic spelling system. Baugh and Cable state that “languages become important because of events that shape the balance of power among nations” (p. 3). This is because international expansion of a powerful nation disseminates its culture with its socioeconomic influence (“Cultural imperialism”, n.d.). Considering that U.S. is undoubtedly the most economically and politically influential hegemon in the world, my view is that such a spelling reform might be an oppressive force that requires the widespread use of standardized English, which marginalizing other regional variations of acculturated English.

According to Antonio Gramsci, the perpetuation of class rule is achieved through largely consensual means, which is a shaping of mass cognition that attains the consent of other social forces to accept popular ideas of ruling class as normal (“Ben Rosamond”, n.d.). In the same way, the rule of English spelling with phonetic spelling system is likely to be set through such consensual means, which is deceptive in that it makes speakers of world Englishes think their languages are of use. Carter suggests U.S. and the countries of Commonwealth be engaged in international coordination of English spelling reform (p. 97). Nevertheless, given that U.S. exerts penetrating power on a newly globalized economy where nations are economically dependent upon each other, an agreement that general American English accent is the standard pronunciation of English would be reached through by mutual consent of English speakers. This is because such consent is made by groups that understand its own interests in relation to the distribution of certain cultural values (“Ben Rosamond”, n.d.). To put it another way, it is highly likely that English speakers

consent to adopt American accent as standard or correct English, because having such accent of the group in power gives them access to social success and prestige. Therefore, my view is that phonetic approach to spelling reform acknowledges a virtual ownership over English to U.S. power in the context of globalization. This perspective will promote the interest of the U.S. to have exclusive control over general cultural values of English.

As a result, I think such spelling reform, which is highly likely to disseminate American principles of pronunciation, reinforces a misperception of the relationship between a standard language and language superiority. By extension, some people mistakenly assume that the accepted upper-class form of language, recognized as standard pronunciation, has become better than other forms. Specifically, Carter asserts that "standard English is the most developed and prestigious form of the language" (p. 85). His claim rests upon the questionable assumption that a standard language has linguistic superiority over various other dialects.

On the other hand, in his analysis of regional accents, Kirk Hazen (2017) reminds us that acknowledgement of a standard accent is not due to its inherent linguistic qualities, but to the social factors that makes standard accent more socially preferred. Hazen's own theory of standard accents is extremely useful because it sheds insight on the difficult problem of the ideology of standard pronunciation, which reinforces a false perception that leads to discrimination and stigmatization. His summary reveals how incongruous it is to make connection between standard accents and linguistic superiority:

Standard accents are those phonological patterns associated with more powerful social groups in any given country. All standard accents rise to prominence for social reasons, not historical precedence: linguistically, they develop in regular ways just as any of the other regional accents that do not happen to rise to power. (Hazen, p. 190)

In making this comment, Kirk urges us to consider that the hegemonic power of standard accents is simply a present social norm, not a historical standard.

Nevertheless, it is likely that standardization of English through spelling reform promotes an ideology that general American English deserves to acquire importance due to its linguistic advantages, and thus superior to other regional variations of English. Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) claims that shared norms of language use reflect the fact that identity is socially constructed ("Center for Applied Linguistics", n.d.). In the context of dialect diversity as a symbol of social identity, diffusion of standardized language signals a potential risk of marking dialects as containing inferior and even wrong features of English. Stigmatizing speakers of regional variation as being a member of lower class, far from educatedness might be expressed as employment discrimination or discrimination in workplace, all of which show signs of cultural invasion that ultimately subjugates people to the overwhelming influence of standard English.

B. Evidence for Speakers' Rights of World Englishes

One significant aspect of contemporary English development is that English has acquired its global status throughout the historical background of British and American imperialism and ongoing postindustrial world, which inevitably resulted in a large array of different English accents worldwide in a systematic, intelligible pattern. Therefore, in my view, such historical and linguistic evidence supports the rights of various speaker's in their use of English. The ownership of English should be extended to encompass English speakers from broader regions and cultural spheres of the world.

In his journal "World Englishes", Rakesh M. Bhatt (2001) demonstrates that unlike the case of historically anglophone countries, in which English was transplanted to North America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand by the migration of native English speaking population, the expansion by Great Britain during the colonial period resulted in the adoption of "English as an official language alongside other national languages" (529). Similarly, Edward Saïd writes that colonial imperialism left English as a cultural legacy in contemporary civilizations of colonized people ("Cultural imperialism", n.d.). This shows that English as a colonial language has remained indispensable in those former colonies, whose populations developed English simultaneously with their native language.

In addition to the history of colonization, a similar phenomenon occurred in the ongoing post-industrial society, where diverse populations of different mother

tongues preferred English for wider communication. Such popularity of English is rather a strong reflection of the geopolitical influence that English speakers have in economics, technology, and even politics in our globalized world. At the same time, Bhatt claims that a global dispersion of English led to the incorporation of English into new sociocultural contexts, thereby stating that "English came into contact with genetically and culturally unrelated languages" (529). Although Bhatt does not say so directly, he apparently assumes that due to the socio-economic privileges and benefits of using it, English has protracted its contact with indigenous languages in various settlements around the world. To summarize, contemporary English has undergone a process of linguistic acculturation as a result of its diasporic experience caused by extralinguistic factors surrounding it. Therefore, the emergence of regional differences of English accent should be interpreted as an unavoidable resultant variation of cross-linguistic interactions, not as an obstacle to English in its universal use.

With the number of native speakers of English overwhelmed by the number of English as a second and foreign language speakers, English pronunciation patterns are no exception to exhibit variations. However, advocates for phonetic spelling in English base their claims on the assumption that pronunciation of dialects vary so much than that of general American (GA), which is recognized to be the prestigious language of English nowadays (Carter, 85). I disagree with their view because, as recent research has shown, pronunciation of world Englishes exhibits a phonological variation which is as systematic as that of the two English recognized to be the

standard nowadays, general American (GA) and received pronunciation (RP). This is a notable linguistic evidence which demonstrates that speakers of various regional varieties of English are equally eligible for sharing the rights of developing legitimate regional variations of English, not corrupted models that degrade the position English as a global language.

In fact, Nur Raihan and David Deterding (2017) argue that even the so-called standard English is intrinsically vulnerable to phonological variations (pp. 208-209). Nevertheless, Mike Davenport and S. J. Hannahs (2010) write that it is still regular as to be effectively set under sound laws, referred to as phonological rules, which produce specific phonetic variants of phonemes in a predictable way, depending on the context in which it occurs (pp. 115-116). As an illustration, phoneme /p/ is realized as the allophone [p^h], which is an aspirated sound as one of the phonetic variants of /p/, when it occurs at the first sound in a stressed syllable as in [p^hɪn]. In short, despite having phonetically different speech sounds at a concrete physical level, pronunciation of GA and RP is rule-governed to an extent that such phonetic variants are derived through phonological rules, as allophones are not produced randomly.

In the same way, a list of different pronunciation models for world Englishes provided by Oxford English Dictionary ("Pronunciations for world Englishes," n.d.) demonstrates that pronunciation of world Englishes also operate on the same systematic phonological rules. Accordingly, it is observed that allophones, which depend on what other sounds are nearby, are distributed mostly the same within

varieties of world Englishes. For example, consonants l, m, and n taking on the function of a vowel in unstressed syllables were found to be common. Considering that phonology is concerned with phonetic environments in which each allophone appears, it could be concluded that world Englishes are in fact not deteriorated at a segmental level. Moreover, Kachru and Smith have found that communication breakdown among English speakers is mostly caused by cultural conventions of communication such as different politeness strategies and the sequence structuring information (pp. 65-68). In this regard, I doubt that phonetic approach for spelling reform is likely to achieve its purpose to fully promote mutual communication because it is based on a belief that foreign accent is the cause of lack of intelligibility, which refers to perception of sound.

In sum, then, adopting phonetic spelling system in English for spelling reform, which is anticipated to perpetuate high values of the particular accent of the group of power as the standard model of English, is likely to be effortless in terms of enhancing communication competence, and instead be a cultural invasion. Even though historical and linguistic evidence demonstrate that phonological variation of contemporary English is a natural by-product, such an attempt refuses to accept that speakers of world Englishes share the rights and identity as norm generators of English language. Therefore, I doubt that English standardized in such a way will achieve its ultimate goal to connect people in international society as the language of a true global communication. After all, it only helps people in power to maintain their exclusivity, since social resources expressed through the medium of standard

language with a particular accent obtain further opportunity for propagation, which reinforce the prestige of that language at the same time. As a result, it may be rather unacceptable to reform English orthography with phonetic spelling system in this age of globalization.

III. Suitableness of Etymological Approach to English Spelling

While some scholars have urged to reform English orthography with phonetic spelling system, my view is that spelling pronunciation is a global phenomenon of English pronunciation which indicates a prevailing tendency of English speakers worldwide to prefer traditional attitudes towards spelling. David Deterding and Ishamina Athirah Gardinar (2017) claim that spelling pronunciation, which refers to a shift in pronunciation of a word to reflect its conventional spelling, is common not only in dialect diversity of English around the world, but also in America as a changing trend (p. 224). For example, they report that “salmon” and “often”, which were traditionally pronounced with omitted consonants, are increasingly pronounced with the phoneme /l/ and /t/ respectively in the middle. (Deterding & Gardinar, p. 224)

Such a spontaneous movement among norm generators of English has great significance on the ongoing dispute of English spelling. Rather than spelling words chaotically with unconventional combination of letters to reflect their distinctive pronunciation patterns, spelling pronunciation shows an increased inclination

among English speakers to match their pronunciation to the traditional spelling. This is clearly on the contrary of what advocates of phonetic spelling system anticipate, as with Carter complaining about English spelling in solely negative term as a daunting barrier in mutual communication that jeopardizes people of English-speaking countries throughout their lives (Carter, p. 84). Therefore, I think spelling pronunciation is a strong evidence that ultimately reflects the needs of English speakers, which is to preserve the present-day standard of English spelling as a stable and useful model of English learning and use.

Consequently, my view is that the present-day standard of English spelling, which follows an etymological approach, is more acceptable than phonetic spelling system. Etymology matters because as Davis Crystal (2012) claims, it explains many of the confusable words in English spelling, which have different languages of origin (p. 22). After all, Baugh and Cable write that present-day English vocabulary is remarkable for its great size and mixed character, mostly due to the long tradition of borrowing words rather than combining existing element to coin a new word (p. 9). In this respect, English vocabulary is a history of cultural hybridity by itself, displaying how linguistic acculturation is made among its speakers throughout the history of English development. In the context of globalization where the value of diversity and multiculturalism has gained prominence, I think such hybridity of English vocabulary adds enough richness to the limitless capacity of English to encompass not only subtle phonological variations, but also the identity of English speakers when English is spelled with an emphasis on preserving the origin of a

word.

In my view, traditional English spelling system with its etymological approach qualifies English to be a global language in that it presents regional origins of the word, opening a way for people to convey their own identity with orthographic novelty. As with controversies with Americanized spelling of a place or group name, spelling a word with its regional origin represents a significant political distinction, showing respect for their uniqueness. For instance, a spelling of the region "Caribbean" makes Caribs easily stand out, referring to an indigenous people of the island which is the regional origin of the word. By contrast, advocates for entire phonetic system in English would rather concentrate more on homogenizing the pronunciation, and support spelling it such as "Ka-RIB-ee-in", which clearly erases any ethnic distinction that shows identity of an individual or a group. Likewise, etymological approach to English spelling conforms to the demand of speakers who wish to exploit their unique identity in their use of English.

In addition, it appears to be an increasing phenomenon that new, foreign terms are being presented in English. This is because global diffusion of new ideas and technology is characterized as one of the most obvious characteristics of modern culture due to increasing interdependence of the world's economies and cultures. That is, numerous concepts and phenomena are newly emerging and dispersed in various academic fields of study, in the realm of art and entertainment, and even in the field of foreign trade business. In this respect, the approach to preserve the etymology of a word will contribute more to make English sustainable in its

international practice as a global language.

IV. Diversity in a Globalized World

Admittedly, English retains its position of privilege in a form of cultural capital, as having English proficiency is basically required for global citizens when conducting various academic, economic, commercial, and political activities. At the same time, however, just as the development of contemporary English shows, it is important to embrace the fact that the global spread of English in various sociocultural contexts has indeed given rise to linguistic diversity of English language, constituting one's identity. In fact, all living languages are dynamic and flexible, subject to change by being spoken by various speakers. As Hazen puts it, "while humans love patterns, variation is part of nature, and, within language, humans create variation as part of its basic fabric" (189). Although ongoing movements to reform English spelling with phonetic spelling system clearly reflect the desire to patternize English in terms of its pronunciation and spelling for universal use, it is clearly incompatible with ongoing language variations of contemporary world Englishes in the context of globalization, justifying any action that stigmatizes any deviation from a standard English. Instead, it is more important to accept variation as a natural by-product of human activities, and when English succeeds to perform such role as a vehicle of international flow of information and knowledge, it will last as the true global language that connects people in

international society.

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