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## Linguistic justice for non-native speakers of English

### Abstract (English)

This contribution normatively assesses the emergence of English as the global lingua franca. It first presents the facts surrounding this emergence. It then argues that the virtue of English is the possibility of global communication. There are however 4 injustices connected with this emergence, which consist in undeserved advantages that accrue to native speakers in terms of communication, resource investment, Anglo-American life-world dominance and dignity. Rejecting English is today however an unrealistic endeavor. Therefore I propose three measures to significantly reduce the injustices that accompany its spread: 1) compensation; 2) containment, and 3) appropriation of English by working out non-native standards for English.<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract (Dutch)

Deze bijdrage evalueert de opkomst van het Engels als wereldwijde lingua franca vanuit normatief oogpunt. Eerst beschrijf ik de feiten. Daarna argumenteer ik dat het grote voordeel van het Engels is dat het ons toelaat wereldwijd te communiceren. Er zijn echter vier onrechtvaardigheden verbonden met de opkomst van het Engels, op het vlak van communicatievaardigheden, investeringsongelijkheden, de dominantie van een Angelsaksische leefwereld en waardigheid. Het Engels verwerpen is echter geen realistische optie. Daarom stel ik drie maatregelen voor om de onrechtvaardigheden die gepaard gaan met de verspreiding van het Engels in te dijken: 1) compensatie voor de investeringen door niet-moedertaalsprekers; 2) beteugeling van de verspreiding van het Engels; 3) toeëigening door niet-moedertaalstandaarden voor het Engels te articuleren.

## 1. The facts

English is fast becoming the lingua franca of the world. A lingua franca or a vehicular language enables communication between people who don't have the same first language. For instance, 97.3 percent of EU schoolchildren are taught English at school in all years of lower secondary education. This figure suggests that the entire EU is likely to follow the lead of countries like Austria, Finland, Sweden,

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<sup>1</sup> My thoughts in this contribution are a further development of ideas expressed in two previous publications, on which I here draw (De Schutter 2018 and De Schutter 2019). I thank the very fruitful discussion with the audience at the EFNIL conference, as well as Ulrich Ammon for several helpful comments and suggestions.

Denmark, and the Netherlands, which have become practically bilingual, with average levels of over 70 percent of the population being fluent in English (for these figures, see European Commission 2017). English is on its way to becoming the EU-wide lingua franca spoken by all EU citizens, either as a native language or as a second language. Europeans will use their first language with co-linguals, and English with most others.

Also in the rest of the world, the dominance of English is striking. Consider the following table 1 of the global “top 3”, based on Jacques Melitz’s authoritative figures.

Language	native speakers	total speakers
Chinese	1,161	1,165
English	357	1,123
Spanish	401	479

Table 1: Global “top 3” languages (adapted from Melitz 2018, 1751)

These figures underestimate the spread of English. They do not yet include for instance English speakers and English learners in India and China (Melitz 2018, 1752). About as many Chinese are learning English as there are native speakers of English in the world today (Xu 2010, 282). In fact it might be more credible to estimate that English is spoken by almost 2 billion speakers (British Council 2013). Especially important here is English’s lingua franca dimension. English is the international language of aviation, the maritime world, natural science production, and to a large extent also of international trade, internet, international news, international sports, the music and the movies industry (Melitz 2018). In the latter sectors, languages other than English certainly play a role but they are dwarfed by English. English proficiency is the best ticket to cross-lingual communication.

## 2. The virtue

This spread of English as a lingua franca is a major asset. Speaking it allows people to travel nearly anywhere and have meaningful conversations, get medical help, apply for jobs, rent apartments, pursue business, and participate at conferences without having to rely on costly and time-consuming translation. Within the EU, it also helps foster an EU-wide public sphere, making it possible to find supporters for one’s political cause on the other side of the Continent. In short, English contributes to instrumental interests in language such as opportunity access, mobility, efficiency, and democracy across the boundaries of native languages.

### 3. The problem

Yet, despite its fantastic instrumental advantages, the spread of English also brings problems. These problems originate in the fact that a subset of the speakers of the lingua franca have that language as their native language. This set-up produces several injustices which I will outline and discuss: communicative injustice, resource injustice, life-world injustice and dignity injustice.

#### 3.1 Communication

The first injustice is communicative in kind. All else being equal, native speakers of English in the world today are generally more fluent in English than others. This communicative inequality is the basis for many other types of inequalities: because native speakers are funnier, snappier, more fluent and generally in greater command of the language, they are better able to convincingly get a point across in discussions, to be successful in negotiating business and other deals, to apply for international jobs in sectors where English is needed, to occupy positions of authority in the academic publishing environment, and so on (see also Phillipson 2003, 40; Van Parijs 2011, 91-95).

#### 3.2 Resource investment

The possibility of cross-lingual communication that English provides is a benefit for all but there are significant burdens involved in bringing about the benefit. These burdens involve acquiring the shared language through resource investments of time, energy and money. These investments are significant; estimates vary between about 500-600 hours for an upper intermediate B2-level of English (Cambridge Assessment English 2019) to “several thousands of hours of study, practice and exposure, typically up to 10.000 or 15.000 hours” (Grin 2011, 60). Without these burdens of time, energy and money, no lingua franca would exist.

The problem is that these burdens are borne exclusively by non-native speakers. Whereas all people grow up in a language, some need to learn an additional language in order to sustain the system, whereas others, the native speakers, can simply use their first language. The native speakers are thus free-riding on the efforts of the non-native speakers (Van Parijs 2011, 50-53).

One additional and distinct dimension of this resource injustice is that the resource investments imply a financial benefit for the native speakers. Teaching English is for example a precondition for the functioning of the current global system, and native speakers are the stereotypical providers of such education and the course books on which it is based (Phillipson 2003, 85). So many of the resources non-native speakers have to invest in acquiring English flow back to those selfsame people who don't contribute to the burdens of producing the *lingua franca*. The non-contributors profit twice.

### 3.3 Life-world

The third injustice results from the problem that, with the global adoption of one particular language, its connected cultural life-world comes to dominate over that of non-native speakers. For native speakers, English has a natural connection to their life-world. Colloquial utterances and idiomatic ways of speaking match the historical culture to which English gives access. And because speaking a language makes it more likely to take in news sources, values, and ways of life expressed in that language, with the spread of the language, also the ideas and shared understandings connected with the life-world within which the language has been embedded as a native language are spread. This leads to an increasing Anglo-American cultural influence. But this is not the proper course, since the goal of using English is to simply have a language of international communication, not a tool of cultural influence. If English travels beyond native boundaries, the rest of the world should not thereby become mentally Anglo-Americanized.

### 3.4 Dignity

The last injustice is based on the loss of dignity experienced by non-native speakers. People's self-respect and dignity are often affected by the esteem their language receives from others, from the state or from the communicative arrangement within which they find themselves. This is the case because the public status accorded to a language is seen as a sign of the status accorded to its speakers.

For example, if there are several language groups in a society, whereby the language of one of the groups is officially endorsed as the only state language, and made into the sole language of the education system, the parliament and the judicial system, then this is often experienced as an assault on the dignity of the speakers of the unrecognised languages.

Something similar is of course happening on a global scale, simply by virtue of the fact that one of the 7,000 or so languages is singled out for superior global status, with negative dignity effect for all other languages. For example, native speakers have understandably come to expect that they can use English with native speakers from other languages, for example when they are in countries where English is not an official language. The non-native speaker is thereby structurally expected to adapt and to address the native speaker in English, who never needs to adapt. The sustained experience of this asymmetry bestows an aura of inferiority on the non-native speaker. Moreover, *within* such conversations, native English speakers hold greater linguistic and symbolic status, voice their thoughts more confidently, and are thus able to gain undeserved prestige from the simple fact that English has become the lingua franca.

## **4. The solutions**

The discussion in what follows starts from the assumption that English is here to stay. Ideally we would want a lingua franca that is not also the native language for a subset of its users. All four of the just discussed injustices originate in the fact that the language that is used as a lingua franca is itself spoken as a native language by a subset of its users. In a world with a lingua franca that has no native speakers and is equally foreign to all, everyone would face communicative issues and resource investment, but in equal measure, and the dignity and life-world problems would not appear.

In theory, an artificially designed language would be the best possible solution. Esperanto would get us significantly closer to the ideal than English does (even though its linguistic proximity to several European languages does not make it a perfect solution). It is also easy to learn.

But Esperanto is currently not a serious competitor to English. Reality is currently marching in a different direction, and attempting to fundamentally change that course is too utopian to credibly make it part of the central course of political action for achieving global linguistic justice. English, with its benefits and burdens, is here to stay. It is currently engulfing all states in the world and it is not losing impetus. Therefore, the challenge is to find out how to cope with its existence in a way that minimizes existing injustices. I think reflecting on this challenge is an urgent task for all non-native speakers. How should we deal with English? I think three measures are in order: compensating for English, containing English, and appropriating English.

### **4.1 Compensation**

A complete solution for the burdens connected to the first two injustices could consist in ensuring perfect English proficiency without resource investment, as in the thought experiment of a linguistic pill that, upon swallowing it, would give perfect proficiency of English. If such a pill existed, we could reimburse its purchase for non-native speakers, as a measure of equalizing communicative capacity and resource investment. Of course, this proficiency pill does not exist. However, we might still financially compensate non-native speakers for the investments of time and money they make in order to learn the language well.

One way to do this is to ask each international institution that will only or predominantly use English (as is currently the case for NATO, IMF, and the World Bank) to calculate what it would cost to translate their internal working processes and publications into all official languages of the countries that are part of the institution, and then to distribute to the speakers of other languages than English the share of this cost that is to be paid by the native speakers. This could easily be adapted and extended to organizations that choose to use only a few languages,

such as the International Criminal Court (English and French) or the WTO (English, Spanish and French).<sup>2</sup> Also other ways of financially compensating non-native speakers for their efforts can be imagined, such as a 'linguistic tax' (Van Parijs 2011, 75-77).

## **4.2 Containment**

The previous solution leaves Anglo-American cultural dominance and dignity problems untouched. To limit these, we should contain and appropriate English. Containment entails taking measures against the encroachment of English in non-vehicular domains. English is valuable for cross-lingual communication but it should not advance beyond those proper limits. We can thus set out to ensure, for reasons of linguistic life-world and linguistic dignity protection, limits to its advance. One example is to provide for what one might call a linguistic welfare state: it is to be a preoccupation of the state to ensure the vitality of its language(s) and of citizens' access to a rich enough life-world and context of dignity in it. We may for example be interested in protecting local language productions through language regulations. In both France and in Flanders, for example, there are minimum quota for French-language and Dutch-language songs played on radio channels ranging from 15 to 35%. In similar ways, measures can be taken to ensure that there remain high-quality academic journals in the humanities in the local language(s) rather than expecting scholars from the humanities to publish their research exclusively in English-language journals.

## **4.3 Appropriation**

There is something intriguing about the resource investment and the communicative disadvantages for the non-native speakers. The way the non-native speakers invest the resources and communicate in English has impact on the additional disadvantages in terms of life-world and dignity interests for the non-native speakers. More specifically, the particular way they invest and communicate can attenuate the latter two disadvantages. If in learning and speaking English they confirm and thereby strengthen the standard norms of English prevalent among native speakers, such as by choosing standard British or standard American English as the proper attainment target, they are themselves co-responsible for the force of the additional injustices. If by contrast they could introduce counterstrategies in the way they speak English, the additional injustices, and even the resource investment itself, could be reduced. If we could make English a pluricentric lingua franca with non-native standard norms for the various Englishes spoken by the non-native speakers, these injustices would be significantly reduced. This is what I will argue in the

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<sup>2</sup> Ginsburgh and Weber (2011) propose a similar setting for an EU with 6 core languages.

remainder of this contribution: non-native speakers should seize English, appropriate it and standardize it on the basis of their own, non-native norms.

To make this argument I normatively think through certain empirical insights from World Englishes, a field within sociolinguistics that studies the many varieties of English around the world. The most influential theorist in this field is Braj Kachru, who came up with the ‘Three Circles’ of English thesis (Kachru 1985). The Inner Circle concerns the traditional bases of English, such as the native English spoken in the UK or the US. This circle is called “norm-providing”. The Outer Circle consists of postcolonial countries where English still plays some official role, such as Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Singapore, Pakistan and India. This circle is “norm-developing”: the various Englishes are coming up with their own norms. The Expanding Circle is the rest of the world, where English is increasingly used. This Circle is ‘norm-dependent’: speakers rely on one of the standard forms for English. Examples are the English spoken China, Russia, Germany, and so on.

I propose that non-native speakers from the Expanding Circle should set out distinct standards for English based on their native languages, in order to make their English transform from norm-dependent into ‘norm-independent’. Such a normative move is hard to make for an empirical discipline, but for a normative endeavor such as mine in this contribution, it is befitting, and in fact some of the World Englishes literature has begun to explore the empirical existence of distinct varieties of English in certain Expanding Circle countries, such as in China (see Xu/He/Deterding (eds.) 2018) or Russia (Proshina 2014).

English is already a pluricentric language, with several accepted standard versions from the first two circles, such as American English, Australian English, British English, and many postcolonial varieties, such as Indian English, Nigerian English, or Singaporean English. Now that the rest of the world is also increasingly speaking and supposed to speak English, we should analogously set out to recognize lingua franca Englishes, such as German English, Spanish English, or Chinese English. I agree with Ulrich Ammon that we should “challenge the inner-circle countries’ exclusive control of the standards of International English” (Ammon 2000, 116). The English virtual language could then cash out in distinct varieties of English with their own codification, following for example the logic of the Australian *Macquarie Dictionary*. This is the extension of World Englishes into the justice field, a just theory of World Englishes, that I propose. Such native tweaking is already happening, but I believe there are normative grounds for supporting and accelerating that evolution.

Common norms do to some extent exist among English speakers sharing the same L1. But these speakers don’t form a regular speech community that would allow them to develop clear and stable common norms. Therefore we might want to actively develop and promote L1 standards of English used for lingua franca purposes, without purely relying on existing usage. We may start to actively create

and stimulate distinct varieties of English in the Expanding Circle based to a large extent on linguistic and cultural features of the native languages of non-native speakers of English.

How do such non-native standards compensate for the four injustices? Firstly, the more cultural references, proverbs, and manners of speech from the non-native life-world enter into the kind of English spoken by the non-native speakers, the greater the life-world gains. Secondly, communicative justice may be furthered by establishing clear norms of ways of speaking English. The same is true, thirdly, of resource justice: what matters is that non-native speakers can get to a clear endpoint at which they no longer need to invest more resources, rather than having to see themselves as permanent learners. Finally, we can understand the non-native ownership that comes with non-native standards as providing a double dignity compensation. First, it allows non-native speakers to speak English with confidence, without an inferior feeling of linguistically bowing to ENL (English as a Native Language) norms. Second, it symbolically takes some status away from native speakers by the very fact that their native tongue is suddenly seized, and changed, by others.

How can this work in practice? Two initiatives are at the heart of this endeavor. The first is to draw on existing patterns of usage to strengthen their perhaps frail existence by publishing lists of English usage. When a consensus exists about the use of the term, then use that term. If however two or more competing options are used, then we can pick one of the sides and privilege that linguistic feature. For example, lists could be published of, say, Danish English usage for the local equivalents of words commonly expressed in the lingua franca, such as local words for professional names that will also be used in English (such as ‘promotor’ for ‘thesis supervisor’ in Belgian-Dutch), for official holidays (e.g. the Chinese official holiday of ‘Dragon Boat Day’), for local words for political institutions and political functions (e.g. for *Bundeskanzler* or the *minister-president*) universities or department names, for the spelling and accents of names of cities, for idiomatic language that does not yet exist in English, for words that have no proper English form yet (such as the Dutch word *bakfiets* for cargo bicycles that seat young children in front of the steering wheel) and so on. Here is another example: on the European continent, the chief academic in universities is usually called *rector* (or *rektor*). The word used in Britain for this position is *vice-chancellor*. To use *vice-chancellor* in their English nomenclature would, in my view, be unnecessarily submissive for European academics. It would also be absurd, if only because the term for Brits correlates with a ceremonial real head, the chancellor, a function that exists in Britain but not in most European universities. The simple alternative is to stipulate that when using English, continental Europeans will call their academic head “rector”.

But secondly, in addition to drawing on existing norms, we can also set out to invent norms where they do not yet exist. For example, we could provide lists



with proverbs from the native language that are rendered in English, such as “a stone falls from my heart” from the German “Mir fällt ein Stein vom Herzen”, for “that is a load off my chest”.

This second solution of inventing norms might meet the standard criticism against standardization attempts: why seek to regulate the language use of people if they might be used to different norms and may thus be disadvantaged by their lack of knowledge of the standard code? In response, it must be stressed that we are here talking about speaking a second, non-native language: that a particular standard code is being transferred cannot be an objection since by definition learning a new language involves acquiring a new code that one did not know before. Perhaps the lack of knowledge of the standard argument can work as a critique of standardization intralinguistically with regard to dialects, but it cannot do so interlinguistically, when it comes to the learning of a new language.

How do we realize this non-native standardization through sedimenting existing usage and coining new linguistic expressions? One way is for all of us, non-native speakers, to unashamedly stake out such usage, and for instance use in English communication literally translated native proverbs or the 24 hour clock. One problem is that individually doing so faces serious costs. One is ridicule. Many speakers mock such “bad English”, or find it hilarious, which explains the success of such funny collections as *I always get my sin!* (Rijken 2005). Another problem is repudiation. In response to a professor who literally translated a Dutch proverb into English by saying “the bullet is through the church” (meaning ‘the die is cast’, thought to refer to the point of no return reached when even churches would be attacked during the Spanish occupation of Holland in the Eighty Year’s War), he was not just mocked but students at Delft University made this statement public, in order to lament the deplorable state of the English of their professors and to call for action (NRC, 9 March 2016).

To prevent such ridicule and repudiation, coordinated action is warranted. We could rely on institutional agents to determine their own rules. For example, in February 2015 the most authoritative Belgian newspaper published a word list with 1,000 Belgian-Dutch words that were traditionally disapproved of for use in formal contexts since they were too ‘Belgian’. The purpose of the list is to foster the attitude that using those very commonly used words in Belgian-Dutch (like words for *motor vehicle inspection* or *misery*) should be legitimate. Something similar would be possible for the kind of English Dutch speakers will use and speak. International newspapers, or the international editions of existing newspapers and magazines such as of *Le Monde* or *Der Spiegel*, could engage in similar activities, now for English.

But a better, more comprehensive solution is to appeal for such standardization to language academies. Most standard languages (except English) have state-backed language academies that supervise the codification and maintenance of the standard version of the language. These language academies describe rules

(in state-backed spellings, grammars and/or dictionaries) for the native language use of the citizens they serve. On the normative World Englishes idea that I am advocating, they are to be asked to also articulate such rules for citizens' vehicular language use. As vehicular language use takes up an ever-greater portion of the overall language use, rules will be needed in the case of official state communication and in the public realm. Instead of expecting speakers to rely on existing standards of native English such as General American or Standard British, national language academies could work out distinct rules for the vehicular language use of their citizens. This would provide for the strongest possible way to allow non-native speakers of English to be able to see themselves as instantiating rules for English that are not experienced as errors. In this way it is possible for them to speak English without linguistic bowing to norms of ENL, and with dignity, according to their own rules. Would there be a more meaningful way of seizing English than to submit it to state-backed rules of a language academy, an essential non-English idea? In short, setting norms for non-native English vocabulary – but also for accents, grammar, and style – should be a new task for existing language academies.

In 1780, the American founding father John Adams proposed a language academy for “federal English” in an attempt to consolidate a distinct form of American English. This academy was never erected, even though today linguists recognize the existence of standard American English. Language communities from the Expanding Circle today could realize what Adams never managed to: to establish a language academy that will propose norms for English that are veritably “our own”.

## **5. Conclusion**

I have analyzed four injustices of English: injustices of communication, resources investment, life-world influence and dignity. I have worked out three answers in response: to compensate for English, to contain English within vehicular spheres, and to appropriate English by working out non-native standards that can figure as one of the many World Englishes.

My claim is not that, once realized, these measures will make the injustices disappear: because English as the global lingua franca is the native language of a subset of that global population, the injustices will persist. But since English will not disappear anytime soon as Europe's and the world's lingua franca, and indeed is only growing in importance, we have no realistic choice but to live part of our lives in it. If English is here to stay, we have to find a way to deal with it, which I suggest to do in the three proposed ways.

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