Negotiating Local Norms in Online Communication

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INTRODUCTION

This entry deals with norms of language use in online communication. Norms are a controversial issue for language learners, in particular when it comes to English usage. There are many varieties of English around the world, but they have different statuses. It is still the case that, for many learners, British and American English have the highest status, and are the only really "proper" varieties to learn; but for others the colonial and cultural hegemony associated with them makes them irrelevant, and even inappropriate, in local contexts.

The Internet has got the reputation of being very open regarding freedom of speech (cf. the Wikileaks scandals), and for being a place where very informal, speech-like language is used. Research has shown, though, that language use online can be a way for social minorities to find a voice, and for those with lower confidence levels to communicate more. Also, it has been demonstrated that non-native speakers contribute more in discussions online, especially with native speaker interlocutors, compared to face-to-face communication. Discourse communities in general have also been argued to develop their own language practices, through the act of using language. The issue under investigation here is what norms do Internet novices adopt in online communication with native speakers of English?

Language production in online seminars by learners of English is analysed to see what norms they develop. The learners are studying on a net-based MA programme in English Linguistics. They were novice Internet users and had never taken a net-based course before this programme. Mostly they were native speakers of Vietnamese, apart from two speakers of Bangla, both cultures which value respect for teachers. The specific norm analysed are reduced forms, where users reduce either the form or formality of linguistic expressions, for example, writing *info* instead of *information*, or *yeah* instead of *yes*. Given this background, and given that it is an education context, we might predict that their language production will be more oriented towards the norms of their native English-speaking teachers, and be more formal. In fact, this was not the case, and there was evidence that the learners clearly developed their own norms of language use. Thus, this constitutes strong support for the idea that online communities develop their own local norms through using language.

The next section presents the theoretical background to these issues.

BACKGROUND

English in the World

The status of English as a global language is a phenomenon of a modern globalised world. However, the power of English is controversial, a controversy which for many has its roots in colonisalism and cultural hegemony. While English is the premier lingua franca for international communication, many see using its norms, and particularly those of British and American English, as betrayals of their cultural identity.

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Kachru (1985) described the classic three concentric circles of English in the world, moving from the minority Inner Circle of native speaker norms, to the Outer Circle of the (mostly colonial) countries where English is the institutional language of government and education, etc., to the Expanding Circle of the rest of the world where English is a second or foreign language. Out of this World Englishes movement has come the strong belief that all varieties of English should have equal status, especially as targets for learners of English.

However, Expanding Circle varieties have had an equally controversial status, just as British and American English have. While some varieties have come to be viewed by the local population as acceptable varieties to learn and use, others have been derided as examples of "bad English". However, even such well-entrenched varieties such as Singapore English are not immune to criticism. Rubdy (2001) noted that the Singapore government had launched a "good English" campaign to clean up the use of Singapore English. In countries like China, there is even stronger criticism of the local variety, demeaningly named "Chinglish". In their surveys of attitudes of Chinese learners and teachers of English, Jin (2005) and Hu (2005) reported that speakers were very negative towards Chinglish, and for them, American English in particular was preferable. However, the situation among teachers of English is somewhat mixed. Hu (2005) noted that half of all teachers surveyed preferred to teach China English, and two thirds of them thought that it would become the standard for teaching English in China (the same has also been reported by He & Li, 2009 and Xie, 2014). The same debate is ongoing concerning Korean English or Konglish (cf. Rüdiger, 2014, for example).

An alternative view comes from the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) movement. Given the fact that the Expanding Circle is much bigger than the rest, with roughly two-thirds of English speakers being non-native speakers (cf. the SIL Ethnologue, www.ethnologue.org), learners should be taught explicitly how to communicate intelligibly with other learners. For instance, Jenkins (2002, 2007) has proposed a core of pronunciation features that are relevant for learners in lingua franca settings. However, this focus on communication involving non-native speakers only, plus the fact that there is still a prescribed set of norms that should be taught, has been criticised as being as extreme a position as one where native speaker varieties are seen as the only correct ones.

Canagarajah (2007: 94) refers to ELF as "a social process constantly reconstructed in sensitivity to environmental factors"; and Park & Wee (2012: 46) state ELF is "always shifting in form and situated within specific contexts". Regarding native speakers' place in such International Englishes, Berns (2008: 329) puts it that "native speakers have an important role, not as norm-setters, …, but as partners with non-native speakers…". Thus, we see it that all speakers need to adapt in cross-cultural communication settings, and it is in the interactions between speakers of English, both native and non-native, that norms of usage are negotiated. Indeed, we can even argue that the native/non-native dichotomy is obsolete, and that we should simply talk about "users of English".

This leads us onto norms in online discourse communities.

Norms in Online Discourse Communities

As argued by Pennycook (2010) and Park and Wee (2012) for example, language is a product of social action, and embodies the social practices that brought it about. According to Pennycook's (2010) ecological perspective, languages adapt to the environment they are used in. Language practices are negotiated and embodied in discourse communities, which are a "locally created social category" (Llamas, 2007: 581); and are "constituted by the language practices they engage in" (Pennycook, 2010: 124).