In today’s cliché of a globalized community, initialised through demographic and econo-political domination, and later regularised and reinforced through technological realities, the world has come to accept the use of English as the unmarked code of world interaction. Generally, the attitude of the discourse of the global spread of English is somewhat jubilant and celebrational (Crystal 1997, Graddol 2006), and this often tends to eclipse attempts to look into some of the less laudatory implications. The more cynical implications generated by this upbeat mood of code ineluctability, which has been placed upon English, have not been totally ignored either. Explorations into the micro and macro aspects of this increased functional role of English as well as its international accountability have been looked at from various perspectives. To name a few: Cross-cultural communication (Clyne 1994); pragmatics (Blum-Kulka et. al. 1989, Wierzbicka 1991); global distribution (Cheshire 1991); standard English (Quirk 1988) variationism (Kachru, 1982, Gupta, 1994); politics (Phillipson 1992, Pennycook, 1998); discourse (VanDijk 1997); critical pedagogy (Pennycook 2001, Canagarajah 1999); identity (Duszak 2002) etc.

Literature in Applied Linguistics, however, has to this day canonically institutionalised a dichotomy among the English speaking community – that of the ‘native’ and the ‘non-native’ (see Davies 1991, Megdyes 1994), despite attempts to deconstruct (Nayar 1994), disillusion (Radwanska-Williams 2008) or even debunk (Paikeday 1985) the issue. While I have made my own scepticism regarding the dichotomy clear in other places (Nayar 1994, 1998), my objection to the dichotomy is more directed towards the socio-political bi-polarity it insinuates and the consequent unequal-contact status it perpetuates. I shall stay clear of the controversy for now and use the term ‘English speaker’ for those who are traditionally classified as native speakers and the term ‘English user’ for those classified as non-native speakers. There is the argument that there will always be a difference in language ability and performance skill between a monolingual or English dominant speaker and a bi/multilingual English user,1 who has acquired it as an additional language, even though that has not been empirically and conclusively established. I believe and contend that the distinction, though politically and attitudinally distasteful, should not be thrown out as invalid and untenable, but is something that needs to be addressed seriously in the current state of the glossography and demography of English users. I intend to pursue this in this paper along two dimensions: A socio-cultural dimension and a power dimension.

First, I want to argue that when one considers English handled by all the communities of the world, apart from the dissimilarities in linguistic versatility and range of English speakers and users, several other factors like their ethnographic and

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1 I have used italics when ‘speakers’ are used in emphatic contrast to ‘users’.
communicational conventions, and their overall cognitive map and weltanschauung are of
prime relevance, more so in the interactional than the transactional (see Brown and Yule
1983) mode of language use. These latter factors are firmly rooted in the language of the
individual’s primary socialisation. For English speakers, the language of primary
socialisation is English, while for English users it is most likely some other language or
languages, culturally proximal or distant to English. (To see how some of these relate to
discourse, see Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997)).

First of all, the control of style repertoire may be especially significant in situations
requiring the middle and lower registers of the language, by both English speakers and
English users, but in different ways. While English speakers, like speakers of any
language, are intuitively tuned into and capable of adapting a stylistically and registrally
appropriate lectal output to fit the context they are in, from frozen to intimate through
formal, consultative and casual, English users may be confined at the most to just two
styles. Indian interactional English, for instance, is often found by English speakers to be
somewhat stilted, pedantic and overformal and does not appear to have much lectal range
in the spoken style. (See Krishswamy and Burde 1998 for Indian English). Besides,
English users being bi/multilinguals may have a different sociolinguistic strategy to
denote style shifts. It has been found, for instance, that many bilingual speakers register
their style shifting through the shifting of codes, where English is most often indicative of
a formal style and the basic language of the informal style. Singaporeans routinely use
Standard English in formal registers and with foreigners, but prefer to self-select their
own colloquial variety, often called ‘Singlish’, for informal situations. Thus stylistic
lectal range does suggest a difference between speakers and users.

Secondly, ethnography plays a great part in the differences between speakers and
users. Ethnography, at least in the sense in which I envisage it, is very difficult to define.
What I include in ethnography comprises anything extra-linguistic that is characteristic of
a community and which contributes to a proper understanding of their social verbal
behaviour. Thus it is a huge basket which includes all the constituents of pragmatics like
cultural and contextual presuppositions, entailments, implicature and sense of relevance,
and the community’s intended and perceived role and rules of verbal behaviour in social
interaction, both attitudinal and interpretive, like when, what, why and how to use
language. Existing literature in cross-cultural pragmatics and intercultural
communication may have arguably tackled many of the issues both holistically as well as
piecemeal, but I intend to focus on two points here, one pragmatic and the other cultural.
In a sense they are not exactly separate but interacting and inter-dependent.

Cross-cultural pragmatics, say on the use of English, often study how different
cultures systematically extract or fail to extract the underlying communicative intent from
a given English surface utterance. Invariantly, it is the English speaker’s interpretation
or version of the utterance that is used to derive the target communicative intent and the
user’s ability or inability to recover the target, which then becomes the focus of
investigation. As part of an ongoing project, some exchanges typical of British English
informal interaction were presented to highly competent English users in India (MA
students in English). Some examples are given below:

1. A: Actually, I am bilingual.
   B: Well, none of us are perfect!
2. A: Can I join you?  
   B: I don’t know, can you?  
3. A: I thought the pavements were safe for pedestrians.  
   B: Not when I’m around, they ain’t!  
   (A is a pedestrian and B, a driver who just drove a mail collection van on to the pavement to collect the mail from the pillbox)  
4. A: I am sure everything’s going to be fine.  
   B: Mind your head. Watch out for low-flying pigs!  
5. A: How come he always gets off so easily?  
   B: I’m sure he knows where the body is hidden.  
6. Study tables are provided in the library (written on the refectory table).  

It was interesting to find that although all the required contextual information was provided for all the extracts, nearly all the subjects totally failed to interpret what to a British speaker will be the true signification of the text as an utterance, and the subjects’ interpretation went no further than the transparent surface meaning. [As most (British?) English speakers will make out easily: (1) is a mild snub of A’s posturing; in (2) The pun on the meanings of ‘can’ is a suggestion that the question is needless; B’s remark in (3) is an apology couched in good-humoured satire; (4) and (5) cleverly make use of the English clichés of ‘flying pigs’ to mean impossibility and of ‘skeleton in the cupboard’ as a potentially blackmailable weakness; and (6) simply is an illustration of indirectness as a politeness strategy in English.  

Accurate interpretation of communicative intent, verbal or visual, of course, involves not pragmatic processes conditioned by culture and value systems alone but also a cognitive mapping of the world of realia, a weltanschauung, including a certain set of imagery and metaphorical connections imbued through the lexico-semantics of one’s dominant language. Eggington (1997) argues that there are metaphors shared by English language speakers. Although he speaks mostly of the metaphors about and not in the language, most multilinguals will agree that quite a lot of one’s ‘metaphorising’ is controlled by the image of the world projected through the semantic system of the vocabulary of one’s primary language, thus entrenched into one’s culture. One could say that competence in a language subsumes familiarity with the metaphorical networks associated with the language. However, when a language with a substantial trans-cultural profile like English is involved, the entrenchment and the sense of appropriation of the language in the socio-cultural identity of the users can cause a replacement of the associations and sense of discourse relevance of the speakers. That accounts for the unrecovered pragmatic interpretation of ‘flying pigs’ and ‘hidden skeletons’. It is not that the users have not come across the English clichés of flying pigs or hidden skeletons, but that they do not associate them with the communicative context and its discourse rules. Thus the spontaneous input of the ‘English sense of humour’ (Nayar 2000) does not enter into the users’ implicature procedure in this situation. Similarly, in example 6, the basic politeness strategy of the English speaker, which relies on the principle of indirectness to avoid face threatening, or its deliberate inversion in example 3, is irrelevant to the users.
A further attempt to test if imagery and metaphor associations of the users would match those of the speakers by using an advert for a male deodorant, (see figure) showing pairs of ‘before’ and ‘after’ pictures produced similar results.

The metaphorical associations of ‘push and pull’ (pushing hard to find a date versus ‘pulling’, or succeeding in getting a date), ‘gooseberry and date’ (the former being the slang term for an unwanted hanger on), ‘empty goal post and goal scoring’ (‘scoring’ as
the slang for bedding a date), ‘no entry and hump’ (humping as slang for having sex) were all lost on continental European and Asian users.

Thus users showed different relevance and implicature rules from the speakers. Yet, having used English as the language of their entire higher education, the Indian subjects were not only very competent in the transactional use of English but also fully confident of their competence. Whether or not this apparent inability to recover meanings congruent with the speaker intention is necessarily a pragmatic failure or lack of communicative competence on the part of the users, it certainly provides an (v)indication of the validity of the rationale for the dichotomy of speakers and users.

Two recent news items in the British media started me thinking along an additional dimension to focus on the distinction between speakers and users. One had to do with class structure and educational performance, which indirectly associated scholastic performance and general cognitive development with language ability, echoing the controversial ‘class, codes and control’ issue raised by Bernstein (1975) in the seventies, and the other had to do with how free availability of information in minority languages tended to counteract cultural integration. To the sociolinguist in me, the connection between the two was the issue of what I have elsewhere called ‘dynamoglossia’, the power that a language, usually a superstrate one, exerted over the general socio-political structuring of communities.

From a dynamoglossic point of view, some aspects of the spread and use of English in the world can be seen to be reflective of the socio-political notion of ‘cultural capital’, articulated by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1982, Robbins 2000). Basically, cultural capital refers to any form of knowledge, skill or accomplishment one possesses as part of one’s cultural affiliation, which gives one a socio-political advantage and a source of power and which then is potentially usable to one’s benefit and profit. A language in this sense becomes what Bourdieu calls an ‘embodied’ capital, which is something one inherits through ethno-cultural membership and affiliation. Bourdieu ‘portrays every day linguistic exchanges as situated encounters between agents endowed with socially structured resources and competencies, in such a way that every linguistic interaction, however personal and insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce’ (Thompson 1992, p 2). In the global interactional situation, the English language thus becomes the ‘embodied capital’ that English speakers can invest and employ to their advantage to a much greater degree than users can.

This cultural capital can be seen to function in a variety of ways. The entire ESL/EFL industry and the discourse of Applied Linguistics which gives primacy, preference, status, knowledegability, authority and in general, ownership and control of the industry to the native speaker is a manifestation of this capital.

A corollary of this primacy is the projection of (what Bourdieu calls) the ‘habitus’ of the English speakers, which is a set of culturally acquired ‘dispositions’ (see Thompson 1992) as the unmarked social targets for the users. Appropriate social behaviour, interactional strategies, discourse structure, ethnographic practices, proper manners, politeness markers, social graces etc., characteristic of the ‘habitus’ of the owners become the norms for others to strive towards and achieve. (e.g. It is rude not to say, ‘please’ or ‘thank you’ or ‘excuse me’.) Eggington (1997) refers to the historical tradition in England to equate proper English with proper manners. Inability to reach the norms has
the potential for social disfavour and loss of status. English users tend to self-deprecate and self-eliminate, and are often (needlessly) ‘apologetic’ of their deviances (Sorry, my English is not good) and English speakers can afford to be patronising (You speak good English!). It is temptingly intriguing to speculate what the English speaker’s reaction would be if the user responded to the patronising complement by saying ‘Thanks, so do you!’ A Reader’s Digest article in 2006 created a furore in India when it produced empirical ‘evidence’ to show that New Yorkers were much more polite than Mumbaiwallahs, who were seen to be the rudest in the world! (See Apte 1973 for the use of ‘thank you’ in India.)

The cultural capital can be and is used to empower English speakers and establish their superstratum status. Nayar (1991) has shown how the cultural capital of English language can be used by English speakers (a) to win a point by merely controlling the language of interaction and (b) to win a point by exploiting the interlocutor’s linguistic but not ideational inadequacy. Again, the English speakers’ privileged position makes even their moderate competence in a second language evaluated well over the excellent English competence of the user. In the same vein, an English speaker being forced to lose his linguistic identity and cultural capital is seen as more regrettable and lamentable than others losing theirs by integrating into English. This cultural capital empowerment is also likely to give the speakers a high sense of self-importance and stature. This is routinely seen in the British media where there is always a trend to transfer putative culpability away from themselves to others. For example, the arrest of British ‘plane spotters’ for national security violation in Greece was portrayed as inhospitable and unsporting of the Greek authorities; criminal English football hooliganism in Turkey was extenuated as a response to extreme provocation. When a British child, left alone in a hotel room by its parents so they could have a good time on their own, disappeared, it was reported more as the inefficiency of the Portuguese security than the irresponsibility of the parents. More recently, the arrest and two-month prison sentence of a British bridegroom in Bratislava for running amok naked in the town square during his stag party was made out to be an instance of Slovak insensitivity to good humour. The report in The Guardian (June 7, 2007) ended by quoting the British bride that she expected the authorities in Slovakia ‘to see sense and release him’, where ‘seeing sense’ means nothing more than ceding the special status of Britisher.

There is also a certain amount of resistance to English users aspiring to the status of speakers and claiming a share of the capital. Christopherson (1973) (cited in Loveday 1982) found that an Englishman’s reaction to a perfect competence, particularly phonological, from an L2 speaker is that of a host who sees an uninvited guest making free with his possessions. Saville-Troike (1989) mentions ‘the competence of incompetence’, which is the art of sounding as an outsider in one’s language use when one is perceived to be so. In the modern geo-economic climate, exigencies of cash capital have encouraged a certain amount of enforced sharing of the cultural capital. The Euro-American business trend of ‘out-sourcing’, which requires the involvement of English users to take on the work of English speakers cheaply, invisibly and unnoticeably, but at the same time without sounding like an outsider, has produced a burgeoning industry of ‘accent neutralisation’ training. This astute economic strategy involves temporarily loaning a certain amount of the cultural capital to the users with such lending restrictions on the loan as to get them adopt just enough features of the
speaker’s ‘habitus’ to be credible but not strong enough to be threatening or fit for eventual adoption of or claims to full rights to the capital. It is quite possible that the vocal opposition to outsourcing in the speaker communities, though ostensibly based on economic motivations, is ultimately based on the fear of the loss of exclusive rights to the cultural capital.

So, needless to say, the use of English as an international language is a lot more than just teaching non-English speakers to communicate using English, or even just assisting the spread and expansion of English, or celebrating the global prevalence and pervasiveness of English. It is riddled with sociolinguistic subtexts, political power tussles and communicational complexities.

References


