"World Englishes: Language Variation and Language Proficiency"

Summary: Special Lecture of Dr. Ahmar Mahboob, U. of Sydney

James F. D'Angelo

Dr. Mahboob at Chukyo DWE

On July 5, 2012, Dr. Ahmar Mahboob, distinguished professor at the University of Sydney's Department of Linguistics, visited Nagoya and delivered a special invited lecture to students and faculty of the Department of World Englishes. In his address: "World Englishes: Language Variation and Language Proficiency," he outlined many of his well-known and more recent ideas[i], in his quest for an ideal 'theory of language' to fit today's complex linguistic ecology. Through this lecture, he demonstrated his wide knowledge and ability to think beyond the confines of existing world Englishes (WEs) research, in an effort to develop a more comprehensive theory of language variation which seeks inspiration in the now largely overlooked Hallidayan systemic/functional roots of Braj Kachru's earliest work, to "fill the gaps" which he feels exist in WEs scholarship.

Mahboob began by presenting several examples of localized English morpho-syntactic usage. In Pakistani English-language newspapers one often sees code-mixing with direct Urdu borrowings such as 'chelum.' None of the audience could guess the meaning of the sentence containing chelum, which is a religious ceremony held 40 days after a person's death.

Also, the word 'washday' in Philippine English refers to a day when one can wear casual clothes to the office, since the usual work clothes are being laundered. In Hong Kong English-language newspapers one commonly observes direct translations of Chinese idiomatic expressions, such as 'egg of a tortoise' and arrogant 'son of a rabbit' which would be hard to comprehend by non-local readers. In the Philippines, L1-influenced usages which differ from American or British English are common, such as, "I am ashamed to you," or "please open the light."

For Mahboob, the dominant focus in WEs research has been on structurally-oriented <u>user</u>-based language variation (at or below clause level), while there is little research using functional approaches[ii] or which focus on <u>use</u>-based language variation. He suggests that to do this, we need to look at meaning-making 'patterns' of language via study of genres and text-types. For example, within the narrative genre, regardless of earlier research into contrastive rhetoric which highlighted differences, there are textual commonalities such as orientation, complication, and resolution. Thus a strong and applicable model of language variation is one which looks at commonalities within text-types.

Mahboob then presented a draft of his model of language variation. One central assumption is that language varies based on whether we are communicating with people in our own community, or outside of it: we use more 'standardized' language[iii] to communication across boundaries. Hence he asked the audience if we could agree with him that one way in which language varies is that there exist local and globalized varieties, and spoken versus written varieties. In the following matrix (see Figure 1), using news sources as the domain, the left side would represent a 'close' or local context, while the right side represents a 'distant' or global context. The top half represents written language, while the bottom half represents spoken language.

Figure 1. **Mahboobian model of language variation for NEWS genre**
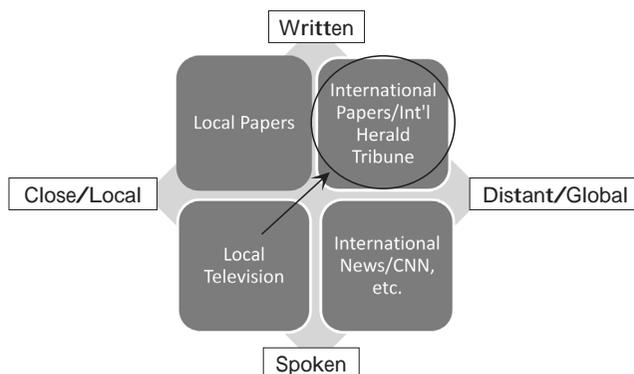
In Mahboob's model, he claims that, "The purpose of education is to move our kids to global membership." This 'global' concept of variation is, on the surface, significantly

different from earlier concepts of world Englishes in education, such as with Canagarajah or Wang, where the uniqueness of each variety of English   and accompanying 'style of learning'   is highly valued in comparison with concepts of standardization or normativity. Nevertheless, the commonly accepted world Englishes concept of the 'educated Singapore ∕ Indian ∕ Dutch English speaker' as goal, does mesh with Mahboob's thinking. His key point is that this is not a 'privileging' of any Inner Circle (i.e. 'native') variety of English. "There is no nativeness here," he states.

Mahboob began part II of his lecture explaining that in these past forty years, the community of applied linguistics has changed greatly. Forty years ago it was all NSs. In recent years the makeup of the contributors to TESOL Quarterly has became very internationalized. Yet the sophistication of the language has not declined. At the same time, we find that the average exit score of Hong Kong graduates from English-medium universities is just 6.4, whereas one needs a 7.0 to start university in Australia. While a WEs scholar of language testing such as Peter Lowenberg might find fault with this logic (stating that the tests are culturally and linguistically skewed in favor of NSs), to Mahboob this is evidence that our model of language variation is 'faulty.' For him, most WEs studies are about dialectology and local divergence, whereas in globalized contexts, language use is about convergence and the need to use communication strategies, as seen in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) research. He points out that conversely, with the novels of John Grisham, one does not find strongly agglutinated language. But it is noticeable that with Sri Lankan textbooks, writers tried to deliberately 'impose' Sri Lankan English on the texts. Is this good for students?

For world Englishes studies, especially regarding pedagogy, the issue of what to use as a classroom model of English is hotly debated. Mahboob comes out clearly on this topic, arguing that, "Exposure to WEs varieties is very important, but the purpose of education doesn't change. The goal in Japan is not to teach Japanese English" (emphasis added). Thus, similar to figure 1 above, Mahboob gives us the following model, adding a third dimension of 'everyday' vs. 'specialized' language. Again, it is the upper right-hand quadrant which educators should aim for:

Figure 2. Parameters of Variation
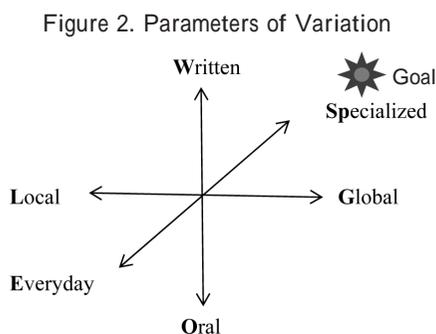
For Mahboob, getting students to this quadrant is what will empower them, will give them the power of language. He mentions: "you might think this is the job of the professor of physics," but it is the job of all educators in each context." He adds, "You cannot do this with a localized model. This is the 'top of the food chain' which will give them access to the discourses needed to be internationally competitive." Mahboob again stressed that while this model does promote a more 'normative' approach to language acquisition, it is normativity as categorized by the genres and text types of specific academic disciplines and their related speech communities, rather than by some sort of 'native-ness'. When as moderator, I suggested a topic for the afternoon panel of the 30th JAFAE conference (several days after the Chukyo lecture), entitled "Variation versus Normativity in Japanese ELT", several of the local scholars I invited, well-steeped in WEs theory, queried me, "I don't understand… what is the point of the topic?" which indicated to me how far WEs scholars have moved away from any concept of normativity as being pertinent within the field, to the extent that the word itself is viewed as a kind of bogey man; something we have already 'defeated' in a sense! Within the above matrix in Figure 2 the three dimensions on the axis yield eight possible combinations, based on the letter in boldface:

LWSp. = No field investigates   GWSp. = English for Specific Purp. /Genre Studies
LWE   = World Englishes Studies   GWE = World Englishes Studies
LOSp. = No field investigates   GOSp. = ESP/Genre Studies
LOE   = World Englishes Studies   GOE   = ELF Studies

For Mahboob, a complete model of language variation should take all of these combinations into account, and trying to prepare our students for GWSp: global, written, specialized language, changes the idea of what 'language proficiency' means. He elicited from the audience their definition of proficiency, and answers included: correct grammar, 'mastery' of a language, high test scores, ability to communicate, excellent four skills, etc. With Mahboob's "Dynamic Approach to Language Proficiency" (DALP), however, proficiency involves selecting, adapting and negotiating two main variables: 1.) knowledge about the context, and 2.) knowledge of the linguistic code.

Using the below Figure 3 matrix, Mahboob explained that we never stop learning special-

Figure 3. Dynamic Model of Language Proficiency (DALP)

Shared contextual knowledge

Zone of expand. code   Zone of Expertise'   highest proficiency
                                             Shared linguistic code
'Zoned out'   lowest   GRE test
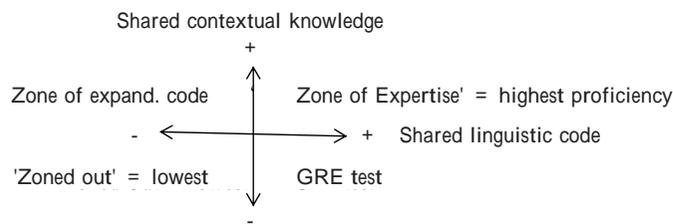
ized language. For example, his own greatest area of English proficiency is in applied linguistics academic discourse. His expertise in this area keeps expanding with his expanding experience and study. Again, he points out that in this model proficiency is not about 'nativeness', it's about how much language you know. An example he provided in the bottom right-hand corner of the DALP model would be Americans taking the GRE test for graduate studies in the humanities. They have high shared linguistic code, but the context is new, so it tests their ability to negotiate new contexts. In the upper left corner, it might be a Japanese Doctor in America for one year. He knows the context, but needs to expand his linguistic code. He also points out that with the DALP, the more you are able to negotiate variation, the higher your proficiency. This is why language tests often fail as a predictor of academic performance. Regarding international students in Australia, the correlation between the IELTS /TOEFL score of new students, and their academic performance, is just .24. This, he explains, is because language tests use a static model, unlike his dynamic one. Again, he stressed, students need to be taught how to 'engage' or negotiate. He reminded the audience that again, this skill is not based on nativeness, but acknowledges the role of negotiation and accommodation skills. Like the Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR) which is closely followed these days, his DALP sees linguistic ability as "What you can do." Our language proficiency is dynamic; it is constantly in flux and always changing, as we experience new contexts.

Conclusion

One criticism I have of this model is that being located in Inner Circle Australia, and having most of his experience in Inner or Outer Circle settings with primarily graduate level students, Mahboob may not realize how gargantuan of a task this is in the Expanding Circle: to equip our students to handle academic spoken and written discourse in a specialized area, in English. It is something that might be achieved only with a very small percentage of the highest level, most motivated students who have a clear goal in mind. But perhaps that indicates that in a context such as Japan, the approach to English is overly democratized and we should look for a flexible, tiered model, which is suited to different levels of proficiency and capability. In so doing, we may be able to push forward English pedagogy in Japan, to incorporate the best achievements of WEs in taking us away from a native-speakerist approach, while at the same time recognizing that we may do a disservice to our students if we do not give the brighter, more motivated ones an awareness of just how sophisticated they need to be, and a curricular path (however difficult it may be) towards getting there. In this sense, Mahboob's work may enlighten us and provide the field with a deeper understanding of what language variation means within global higher education. If

Japanese students are to compete with those from around the world as 'global jinzai', they will have to use English as a 'main working language' for their college years, or especially if they pursue graduate studies   something which rarely happens today in Japan. Those who go on to become professors or other specialists in some cases do eventually reach a high enough level of English reading proficiency, but they might find the path easier if they had been given more of a head start in their undergraduate years by faculty who push them to read and do important work in English, in their field. In Japan, this is not easy, because she has admirably developed and maintained new academic language in almost every field of inquiry, in contrast with the Philippines, Malaysia or East Africa, where the local languages may not have developed in step with advancements in specialized areas. Still it seems for those who know they wish to pursue economics, linguistics, sociology or many other fields in an international setting, there should be undergraduate programs available, modeled on Mahboob's thinking, which can give them early access to their target speech communities.

Notes

i   He followed up this lecture two days later, with the keynote address at the 15th anniversary, 30th conference of the Japan Association for Asian Englishes (JAFAE) entitled "Managing Identity in Education" at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies. See Newsletter #36 of the organization (p. 3-4) for a review of that lecture by this author, at www.jafae.org

ii   Mahboob is a scholar whose work has a strong tie to Hallidayan Systemic-Functional (SF) Grammar

iii   This is similar to Kirkpatrick's idea that in ELF communication, we increased the 'shared' component of language, and Yano's concept that (2009, p. 211-212) the more international the communication, the greater the 'common denominator.'

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