

Is Euro-English a New Reference Language and Can It Be Taught?

Igor Korneev

Lund University

Introduction

If one were to ask random individuals how they have learned English, some would refer back to their teachers or to mass media. If one were instead to ask which variety of English – i.e. British or American, they had as their reference point, one would get many replies in favor of both, such as "My teacher was from the UK", or "My teacher was from the US". But what if one would get "I do not know" as an answer? In such case, that person is either unaware of the difference, or was likely exposed to a non-traditional variety. In mainland Europe and Scandinavia, varieties belonging to neither British nor American English are often referred to as "Euro- English". If Euro-English exists as a usable variety, can it become a new reference language alongside British English and American English? In this paper, I intend to address this question, and intend to discuss the potential of Euro-English in terms of teaching.

Discourses on the Role of English in Europe

Back in year 2001, the Eurobarometer survey showed that 32% of the EU population knew English legibly on a conversational level, while other major European languages turned out to be in a minority percentage-wise (Murray, 2003). Moreover, some 80-90% of the citizens of Scandinavia, France, and Greece voted in favor of English being the useful language to know (Murray, 2003). Another Eurobarometer survey from 2006 showed that 38% of EU citizens knew English legibly on a conversational level, while other similar surveys by the European Commission revealed that 51% of EU citizens had English as a native tongue or as a foreign language (Forche, 2012). Research studies from the 1990s, years 2002, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010 and 2012 by various academics tend to converge on the view that English has become the dominant language used in science, research, politics, international organizations, technology, medicine etc. (Forche, 2012).

At the same time, there are also serious ongoing discourses about the role of English in Europe in terms of opportunities for professionals versus potential threats to indigenous culture (Pulcini, 2012). The Sheffield conference for instance, with full seriousness, launched a project, named "English in Europe: opportunity or threat?", with the involvement of the University of Sheffield, University of Copenhagen, Charles University (Czech Republic), University of Saragoza (Spain), the South-East Europe Research Centre (SEERC) and the City College in Tesseloniki (Greece) (Pulcini, 2012). The existence of such projects reveals, that even though English is popular among EU politicians, European scientists and entrepreneurs (Murray, 2003), its sociopolitical role in Europe is still ambiguous. If even the role of English as a language in Europe is yet unsettled, then it is imprudent to give preference to any variety. Despite this, many European educational institutions only recognize traditional varieties as valid.

Where Euro-English Stands in Relation to Traditional Varieties

Dominance and institutionalization of varieties

Modiano (2003) has argued that both the British and American varieties are, in fact, still manifested as reference languages in many educational institutions in mainland Europe (p. 35), while Murray (2003) points out that learners of English are reprimanded or corrected whenever they use forms which deviate from traditional ENL (English as a native language, British or American English) varieties (p. 151). Owing to this kind of biased favoritism, British and American English have become institutionalized varieties, while Euro-English has not. Algeo (2006) has argued that American and British English have become two major varieties for the simple reason that more material – i.e. textbooks, dictionaries etc. – exist for both of these varieties than for other less represented varieties (p. 1). Modiano (2003) noticed that the introduction of Euro-English in mainland Europe as a taught variety would require not only textbooks, but also guidelines and reference materials (p. 37).

The mere fact that other European languages such as Swedish can add new expressions into English suggests that Euro-English is in all likelihood a rich mix of words and expressions from other European languages, either translated into English, or somehow incorporated. Moreover, statistical research revealed that students are able to distinguish traditional from deviant forms of English. For example, one study of Erasmus students as described by Forche (2012), revealed that only 22% of them recognized the phrase "That's the woman which I met at the pub" as acceptable from a grammatical standpoint, while the rest seemed to know that it is more grammatical to use whom (33.9%), or the zero article (27.1%) instead of which (p. 470). Such a percentage distribution only reinforces the argument that the educational system in European countries has taught the students what correct English should look like, with a bias towards the British or American variety.

Preferences towards varieties and the role of European educational institutions

Another survey which Forche (2012) analyzed and described in his article asked to Erasmus students "Which kind of English are you trying to approximate?" (p. 461). The students were also presented with options to formulate their reply: "English as it is spoken in England", "English as it is spoken in the USA", "English as it is spoken in mainland Europe" and "English as it is spoken in international communication" (Forche, 2012, p.461). In choosing a target variety, the results were such that 44.1% of the students preferred International English, 22% chose British English, 13.6% chose European English, and less than 22% but more than 13.6% chose American English (Forche, 2012, p.461). This finding is crucial in that it reveals that students have the idea that there is a more diverse "International English" and are inclined to choose this more all-inclusive variety to the traditional ENL varieties.

The most plausible reason why European English received a minority percentage is that students did not recognize it as a competitive or widely represented variety, which suggests that Euro-English is not only under represented, but is not even recognized by educational institutions in Europe. Students have an awareness that Euro-English exists, but are only, as the previous survey has shown, able to identify deviant forms of English from the traditional ENL forms.

Simply put, they do not perceive Euro-English as a sufficiently large or sufficiently important variety. European educational institutions could have done more to introduce this new variety to students.

Advice for Institutions and Pedagogues

While one can conclude that Euro-English does exist as a usable language-variety on its own, more statistical research is required to establish acceptable grammatical forms and vocabulary use. Once acceptable forms have been approved, new corpuses, thesauruses, dictionaries, idiom and collocation textbooks, and teaching material, would need to be produced and placed on the shelves of European libraries, schools and universities alongside British and American books. I advise European educational institutions to open their gates for Euro-English. Some projects have already been launched to study the use of English as a lingua franca by German, Italian and other speakers, and researches at the University of Vienna are also compiling the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) (Murray, 2003) which will hopefully include elements of Euro-English. For teachers, it is important to start considering ways of teaching Euro-English.

Conclusion

Conclusively, European educational institutions must assign an equal status to Euro-English, and, in the long run, to give it the status of an ENL variety. Only under such conditions can Euro-English become a new, teachable reference language. Once Euro-English has been fully incorporated into the national syllabuses of European educational institutions, I envisage that students will be able to select which variety they wish to learn throughout their education. In this way, one avoids being subjectively, institutionally, or politically biased towards any particular variety. In fact, the Swedish national syllabus at the upper secondary school level does not specify which variety of English teachers should teach. Instead, it stresses the importance of giving the students a usable version of the language — i.e. the ability to use English in day-to-day situations and the ability to hold conversations in English (Skolverket, 2012). In Sweden, it is therefore possible to teach Euro-English and similar concessions could be made in the syllabuses of other European countries.

References

- Algeo, J. (2006). *British or American English? : A handbook of word and grammar patterns*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Forche, C.R. (2012). On the emergence of Euro-English as a potential European variety of English — attitudes and interpretations. *Jezikoslovlje*, 13(2), 450-470.
- Modiano, M. (2003). Euro-English: A Swedish perspective. *English Today*, 19(2), 35-39.
- Murray, H. (2003). Swiss English teachers and Euro-English: Attitudes to a non-native variety. *Bulletin suisse de linguistique appliquée*, 77, 148-151.
- Pulcini, V. (2012). English in Europe: Debates and discourses. *The European English Messenger*, 21(2), 42.
- Skolverket (2012, September 12). *English 120912*. Retrieved from http://www.skolverket.se/polopoly_fs/1.209314!/Menu/article/attachment/English%20120912.pdf