Evolution of a new lingua franca

Professor Andy Kirkpatrick is leading a project that aims to establish how Asian usage is changing the English language and identify factors underpinning successful communication between people of different nationalities.

How did you become interested in the use of English by Asian populations?

I first became interested in English use in Asia as a child. I grew up in Malaysia (then Malaya) and Singapore, where the great majority of the population was multilingual to some extent and where English was used as a lingua franca, or a shared language between people who do not speak the same language, at least among the more educated.

I am currently Professor in the Department of Languages and Linguistics at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. I am also Adjunct Chair and Professor of English as an International Language at the Hong Kong Institute of Education (where I worked for six years), Adjunct Professor at Curtin University, Perth (where I worked for 11 years), Visiting Professor at Bath University, and Honorary Professor at the London School of Oriental and African Languages, UK. Additionally, I have worked in tertiary institutions in China, Hong Kong, Myanmar and Singapore.

What are the goals of the Asian Corpus of English (ACE) project?

The initial objective was to collect a corpus of naturally occurring speech events from Asian multilinguals using English as a lingua franca to allow researchers to investigate how they adopt and adapt English. However, we also hope that the findings from research based on the corpus will be able to inform English language teaching in the region and, equally importantly, provide information for Anglo-centred native speakers on how to communicate successfully with Asian multilingual English speakers.

Can you describe how English is being adapted by its multilingual users across Asia, especially in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)?

This is the major question we hope ACE will help us and fellow researchers address. Asian multilinguals are using English as a lingua franca to communicate with each other in contexts that are beyond a traditional Anglophone and Anglocultural setting. We are interested in seeing not only how these users of English are adapting the language linguistically – for example, by the use of new or so-called ‘non-standard’ grammatical forms – but also how they are adapting it to reflect their cultural norms and values.

Does culture affect communication?

Speakers place great emphasis on successful communication and develop strategies to ensure this. This requires an understanding of the different cultural values of the peoples across ASEAN – an extremely diverse region both linguistically and culturally. More than 1,000 languages are spoken in the region, and it represents the major religions with Buddhism in Thailand and Myanmar, Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia, Christianity (especially Catholicism) in the Philippines, and the Indian religions spread throughout the region within the Indian diaspora – with Hinduism in Bali, for example. Asian multilinguals therefore need intercultural competence in a range of Asian cultures to communicate successfully using English as a lingua franca. It follows then that native speakers from more traditional ‘Anglo’ backgrounds will need this intercultural competence. We hope the communicative strategies identified in ACE will help provide the basis for this competence.

Do you believe ACE could impact the cultural or economic landscape of Asia?

The findings from ACE could influence the English language curriculum throughout the region by promoting local cultures, in alignment with the objective in the ASEAN Charter of showing respect for the cultures and religions of the region. Adopting what I have called a ‘lingua franca approach’ to teaching English across the region could also help learners recognise that their goal is to be able to communicate successfully using English, rather than model themselves upon native speakers.

How do you see your research evolving in future?

I’d like to continue researching how English as used by Asian multilinguals is developing and being adapted by them to reflect their own cultural norms. For example, schools attached to mosques in Indonesia – the country with the world’s largest Muslim population – are developing courses in ‘English for Islamic purposes’. Far from seeing English as a conduit for ‘Western’ ideas and values, they see English as a conduit for their own ideas and values. Another example is the realisation that English is needed to protect and project local interests – whether these be, for example, Cambodian, Vietnamese or Filipino – in tough ASEAN meetings. Debates within ASEAN about the plight of the Rohingya people in Myanmar is a current example.
Recognising that English is changing in Asia through widespread use, a project led by Griffith University in Brisbane advocates a move away from traditional teaching according to idealised English norms, to a lingua franca-centred approach nuanced by local values and norms.

**LINGUA FRANCA EVOLVED**

In medieval times to bridge trade and diplomacy barriers between people of different nationalities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Based on Italian, it included words from Spanish and Occitan to Turkish and Arabic. Now the term lingua franca designates any vehicular language that enables communication between people who do not share a native language.

In the 21st Century, the most widely used lingua franca is English: a corollary of this is that most English language users are not native speakers: there are about 400 million native speakers, chiefly as a consequence of colonial activities, as against more than a billion non-native users, most of whom are Asian. Moreover, the number of Asian speakers is growing – for example, there are about 300 million people learning English in China alone.

As a language, English is highly adaptable and so, especially within countries and regions where more than one ethnic language is spoken, its use is growing exponentially as a means of bridging communication gaps. Inevitably, a lingua franca evolves as it incorporates influences from the native languages of its users; thus, English is evolving into a global language with regional variations.

**ASIAN USE OF ENGLISH**

There is a large colonial legacy in South East Asia: some countries have established their own national variety of English, such as Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore, while others have attempted to formally install English as its second language. Take the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), as an example. It has used English as its working language since its inception in 1967, and in 2009 all participant countries formally signed up to using English, though competence in ‘standard’ English is still variable across the region, and multilingualism and high proficiency are usually associated with the middle and upper classes.

Professor Andy Kirkpatrick of the Department of Languages and Linguistics at Griffith University, Brisbane, sees the ASEAN adoption of English as its sole working language as adding further impetus to its already burgeoning use as a lingua franca in Asia. He is exploring changes that are emerging from the usage of English by non-native Asian speakers and is also interested in what the implications of this might be for native English speakers who want to communicate effectively with Asian multilinguals: “English as a lingua franca is not a stable variety; the language and meaning are constantly being negotiated among speakers,” he states.

**ANALYSING ASIAN ENGLISH**

The Asian Corpus of English (ACE) project, led by Kirkpatrick, is investigating universal but distinctive features, similarities and differences between spoken European and Asian English as a lingua franca (ELF) grammar and usage. ACE was designed to complement the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE), led by Professor Barbara Seidlhofer of the University of Vienna, which recently compiled a million-word corpus of European ELF. ACE seeks to obtain an Asian ELF corpus (or collection) equivalent to that of VOICE.

Specifically, ACE will identify shared features and commonly used constructions, lexical items and sound patterns as well as communication strategies that reliably lead to successful communication. Likewise, it will also examine the factors that consistently lead to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. ACE also aims to assess to what degree communicative success depends on the degree of approximation to standard English, and identify the approaches speakers employ when negotiating meaning.

Participants in ACE are multilinguals from ASEAN+3 – that is, ASEAN and China, Korea and Japan – who have assessed themselves as having a high proficiency in English in that they have volunteered to attend meetings (called by their own institutions or organisations), which they know will be conducted in English. The ACE team received permission to record these meetings.

www.internationalinnovation.com
TENSE AND TOPIC IN ENGLISH AS AN ASIAN LINGUA FRANCA

OBJECTIVE
To understand the development of new varieties of English and the role of English as a lingua franca in Asia.

KEY COLLABORATORS
Dr Wang Lixun, Hong Kong Institute of Education • Dr John Patkin, City University, Hong Kong • Dr Sophiaan Subhan, Griffith University, Australia

PARTNERS
Dr Isabel Martin, Ateneo de Manila University, the Philippines • Professor David Deterting, University of Brunei, Brunei • Dr James D’Angela, Chukyo University, Japan • Ji Ke, Guangxi University, China • Professor Low Eeling, Institute of Education, Singapore • Lee Hsing-chin, SEAMEO RETRAC, Vietnam • Dr Kieu Anh, National Taipei University of Business, Taiwan • Professor Azirah Hashim, University of Malaya, Malaysia

FUNDING
Australian Research Council (ARC)
The Institute of Education, Hong Kong

CONTACT
Professor Andy Kirkpatrick
Director of the Asian Corpus of English (ACE) project
Griffith University
School of Languages and Linguistics
170 Kessels Road
QLD 4111
Australia
T +61 737 356 754
E a.kirkpatrick@griffith.edu.au
http://corpus.ied.edu.hk/ace/
http://bit.ly/ProfAndyKirkpatrick

ANDY KIRKPATRICK is Professor in the Department of Languages and Linguistics at Griffith University, Australia. He is also an editor of several books, including the Routledge Handbook of World Englishes. He is the author of World Englishes: Implications for ELT and International Communication (Cambridge University Press) and English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN: a multilingual model (Hong Kong University Press). He has also been appointed editor-in-chief of the Asia Journal of TELF. He has lived and worked in many countries in East and Southeast Asia, including China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore.

recordings are then transcribed for data collection and analysis, including the topics discussed and the extent to which Asian cultural values and norms are reflected in their ELF usage. Kirkpatrick notes that ACE has already provided key information about ELF in Asia: “A corpus allows us to make far more accurate analyses of the use of certain linguistic features. ACE is showing us that, not surprisingly, Asian multilinguals need competence in regional cultures”.

TEACHING ENGLISH IMBUED WITH LOCAL CULTURE
Kirkpatrick notes that as phonology and pronunciation are key factors in interpersonal communication, Asian inflexion, in the form of timing that gives equal emphasis to each syllable when speaking, generally facilitates mutual intelligibility: “Speakers of British and American English have a tendency to stress ‘swallowing’ unstressed syllables,” he explains. “Because of this Asian and many African multilinguals are likely to be more readily understood internationally than native speakers.”

Varying policies among the ASEAN+3 concerning the teaching of English as a foreign language underline the significant variations in speaking capability across Asia. Kirkpatrick feels that the fundamental barrier is the predominant preference for teaching standard English. Hiring policies in the region tend to prejudice non-native English speakers as teachers, and may even favour native speakers untrained as teachers over multilinguals with teaching qualifications: “It would facilitate communication among Asian multilinguals if they viewed English as ‘their’ language, not solely ‘owned’ by native speakers,” Kirkpatrick argues. Thus, ACE is also reviewing the traditional English language teaching policies, practices and styles in the region.

Kirkpatrick proposes that ELF should be taught specifically for lingua franca purposes, tailored to the ASEAN+3 context and recognising that ELF exchanges typically take place in non-Anglophone and non-Anglocultural settings. The lingua franca approach to teaching would be an important contribution, not only for those learning English as an additional language but also native English speakers who wish to be able to communicate successfully with Asian multilinguals. The ASEAN English curriculum thus needs to design materials to equip learners with intercultural competence, imbuing teaching materials with references to local and intercultural/multilingual situations and interests, Asian literature written in English, and intercultural norms and etiquette. The approach also differentiates spoken from written English, with templates for written English determined by genre (such as tweet, poem, job application, technical report, etc.), discipline and culture. Kirkpatrick concludes: “We need to realise that English is now an ‘Asian’ language being shaped and adapted by Asian multilinguals in non-Anglo-cultural contexts. Native speakers who wish to communicate successfully with these Asian multilinguals will need to understand how English operates as a lingua franca in the Asian region.”