



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2009

Assessing the status of lesser-known varieties of English

Schreier, Daniel

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000042>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich
ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-27243>
Journal Article

Originally published at:

Schreier, Daniel (2009). Assessing the status of lesser-known varieties of English. *English Today*, 25(1):19-24.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000042>

Assessing the status of lesser-known varieties of English

DANIEL SCHREIER

The study of lesser-known varieties of English is opening up new research

Introduction

Over the last twenty years or so, the role(s) and function(s) of English around the world have received a great deal of interest from linguists concerned with research on topics as diverse as sociolinguistics, variation and change, contact linguistics, language typology, genetic linguistics, etc. The discussion received a major boost by Braj B. Kachru's (1985, 1986) suggestions that Englishes can be classified into three largely concentric circles:

- an *Inner Circle*, i.e. countries where English has considerable time depth, in a sense representing the traditional bases of English (the UK, USA, Australia, etc.) where the language is spoken natively (English as a Native Language, or ENL), all in all by a total number of ca. 350 million speakers;
- the *Outer Circle*, which includes countries where English is important for historical reasons and mostly spoken as a second language (e.g. the legacy of political expansion or colonisation by the British Empire) and where it plays a prominent role in national institutions (ESL countries include India, Nigeria, the Philippines, Pakistan, Kenya, non-Anglophone South Africa, etc.); total number speakers between 150 and 300 million;
- and finally the *Expanding Circle*, in which we find countries where English plays no historical or governmental role but where it is widely used as a foreign language or lingua franca (EFL countries include China, Russia, Japan, much of continental Europe, etc.). The total number of English speakers in this circle is most difficult to estimate for obvious reasons (lack of population statistics, spe-

cific or limited purposes of interest, etc.) but estimates range from 500 million to over one billion (Crystal 1997).

Kachru's work inspired others and alternative models were put forward by McArthur (1987) and Görlach (1990). Though they differ on how the varieties should be classified (varying in criteria such as geographic distribution, usage and function, development history, etc.), they share the idea that varieties of English can be grouped in first- (or native-), second- and foreign-speaker groups. Kachru's model remains by far the most widely discussed and influential approach, yet a number of problems in this approach have been identified, such as that it is static rather than dynamic (not allowing for transition from one circle to the other), was based on geography, history and ancestry, rather than on perceptions of identity (e.g.



DANIEL SCHREIER is Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. He previously taught in New Zealand, Germany and in the USA. He has published more than 30 articles in peer-reviewed journals and international handbooks; his books include 'Isolation and Language Change' (2003), 'Consonant Change in English Worldwide: Synchrony meets Diachrony' (2005; both with Palgrave Macmillan), and, most recently, 'St Helenian English: Origins, Evolution and Variation' (2008, Benjamins). He is on the Editorial Board of 'English World-Wide' and 'Multilingua'. Email: schreier@es.uzh.ch

Singapore) or linguistic features shared, and also that it failed to account for linguistic diversity within these varieties (see Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008). Debates also centred on the question as to whether (and to what extent) the inner circle (UK, USA, New Zealand) should be 'norm-providing', so that norms are developed in these countries on account of the fact that English is spoken as a native language. By contrast, the outer circle is 'norm-developing' and the expanding one 'norm-dependent', thus relying on the standards set by native speakers, which is a controversial concept in itself (Davies, 2004; Hackert, *fc.*).

The point I would like to discuss in this article concerns neither speaker competence nor orientation towards – and adoption of – speech norms (though I believe these to be central questions in any analysis of English around the world). Rather, the paper has a taxonomic purpose, namely to look into whether or not Kachru's (1985) model is a useful tool to classify the so-called 'lesser-known varieties of English' (LKVEs), *i.e.* Englishes that so far have received little or no attention at all in the research on English as a world language. We need to bear in mind that all existing models have been formulated and tested with data from varieties that were/are known and that have been documented and researched, though some better than others, of course.

Identifying and classifying lesser-known varieties of English

Since we are still in the process of documenting – perhaps even discovering – new varieties, it is legitimate to ask whether these can be integrated into existing models or whether they pose a challenge to them, making new taxonomies necessary. This question is particularly important and timely in the light of Schreier, Trudgill, Schneider & Williams's (*fc.*, 2009) attempts to trace LKVEs in different parts of the English-speaking world: the British Isles (Shetlands and Orkney, the Channel Islands), the Americas and the Caribbean (the Canadian Maritimes, Newfoundland and Labrador, Honduras/Bay Islands, White Caribbean, Dominica, and Anglo-Argentine English), in the South Atlantic Ocean (the Falklands Islands, St Helena and Tristan da Cunha), Africa (White Zimbabwean English and White Kenyan English), and in Asia and the Pacific (Eurasian English in Singapore, Peranakans English in

Malaysia and Singapore, and Norfolk Island and Pitcairn). Schreier *et al.* show that, despite obvious differences, LKVEs around the world share a number of similarities, namely that 1) they are identified as distinct varieties by their respective speech communities and other groups in their social environment; 2) they are associated with stable communities or regions; 3) they are typically spoken by minorities, usually delimited (not necessarily 'isolated' but socially or regionally distinct) to small communities which are embedded into a larger (regional) population ecology; 4) they are originally transmitted by settler communities or adopted by newly formed social communities that emerged early in the colonial era, so that they substantially derive from British inputs; 5) they are formed by processes of dialect and/or language contact (which makes it impossible to ascribe them genetic status, *e.g.* creoles or koinés); 6) they frequently take the function as identity carriers by their respective communities; and 7) they are very often endangered.

The study of LKVEs attests to the heterogeneity of Englishes on a global scale and may help us in uncovering the complex processes that underlie the formation of new varieties. They are thus not only essential for a more complete documentation of English as a world language but also carry immense potential for linguistic analysis, allowing us to address issues such as the formation mechanisms of new varieties of English, dialect obsolescence and death, language and identity, linguistic change in a context of language minorities, *etc.* These are massive questions and subject to extensive future research, so, in the present paper, I would like to focus on one of these LKVEs, namely the variety of English that developed on the island of St Helena in the South Atlantic Ocean, and look into its general implications for language classification as discussed above. I start by giving a brief historical overview of the local community and then detail some of its linguistic characteristics to discuss whether (or not) it fits the criteria for inclusion in Kachru's (1985) model, and if so, what status it should be given.

The case of St Helena

The volcanic island of St Helena lies in the mid-central South Atlantic Ocean, 1,930 km west of Angola and just south of the equator. Its nearest neighbour (geographically speaking) is

Ascension Island, more than 1,000 kilometres to the northwest. St Helena covers 122 square kilometres, and its topography mostly consists of steep, relatively barren and rocky territory, unsuitable for cultivation. The island's capital and only town is Jamestown, although there are smaller settlements such as Halftree Hollow, Blue Hills, Sandy Bay and Longwood (the latter being the residence of Napoleon Bonaparte, who was exiled on the island from 1815 until his death in 1821). St Helena's population of approximately 4,000 (2006) is of mixed European, African and Asian origin, and English is the only language spoken on the island.

Originally uninhabited, St Helena was discovered in 1502 by the Portuguese, who, just like the other European seafaring nations who followed after them, used the island as a refreshment station and sickbay on their journeys to and from the East. Until claimed by the East India Company (EIC) in 1658, the island was never permanently or formally settled (Gosse, 1938). It was in that year when a concerted settlement policy was implemented, and soldiers, servants and planters (employed and contracted by the EIC, who held direct control over the island until the 1830s) were recruited to St Helena, along with slaves supplied on request by the Company's ships. Even though the exact origins of the British settlers are not known, there is evidence that most of them came from southern England. Moreover, the majority of the planters had working-class origins and the EIC recruited many of its soldiers (and settlers as well, for that matter) from among the unemployed in England (Gosse, 1938:72). We know that many of them were illiterate (as evidenced by an entry in the *St Helena Consultations* (quoted in Brooke, 1808) on February 2nd, 1774: "On 31st Jan. six soldiers deserted in the night taking two Boats ... The deserters were illiterate men of bad character and only a few days provisions and must inevitably perish at sea").

The origins of the non-white population are better documented; records show that slaves were imported from the Guinea Coast, the Indian sub-continent and Madagascar, and to a lesser extent from the Cape and Larger Table Bay area, the West Indies, Indonesia and the Maldives. In 1789, the importation of slaves officially ended, but the lack of cheap labour was compensated with Chinese indentured labourers who arrived in the early nineteenth century. However, very few, if any, stayed on

permanently and slavery was finally abolished in 1832 (Melliss, 1875). In 1815, the total population was 3,342, comprising 694 whites, 1,517 slaves, 933 non-permanent army personnel, as well as some 300 indentured labourers from China.

The situation changed dramatically in 1834, when St Helena's administration was transferred from the EIC to the British government and St Helena officially became a crown colony. Poverty led to out-migration and the remainder of the nineteenth century was characterised by extreme hardship. This period saw an increase in mobility and was characterised by ethnic mixing. Governor Charles Elliot remarked in 1868 that 'there can be no position on the face of the earth where it would be more difficult to discriminate between the various strains of blood of which the body of the population is composed than here in St Helena' (quoted in Gosse, 1938). Population loss due to out-migration was compensated by the arrival of immigrant groups: the indentured labourers from China, liberated African slaves, brought to the island after 1840, when St Helena was used as base for rehabilitating slaves from captured slave ships (some of them chose to stay while the majority were sent on to the West Indies or repatriated back to the African mainland) and hundreds of Afrikaans-speaking Boer War prisoners in 1902, only very few of whom stayed behind upon their release.

The increasing use of steam-driven ships and the opening of the Suez Canal voided the island's strategic purpose as a refreshment station. With the exception of a short-lived flax industry (which ended in 1965 when the British postal service switched to cheaper synthetic fibre), no industry has provided a viable means of sustaining the island. There is no airport and the single government-subsidised ship that connected the island with the United Kingdom has changed its route to become more cost-efficient, now only serving Ascension, St Helena and Cape Town (the annual run to Tristan da Cunha was cut as well). Today, many Saint Helenians (or 'Saints', as they call themselves) work on the military bases on Ascension and the Falkland Islands; since 1999, when the British Government conceded full citizenship rights to the islanders, they have full access to United Kingdom workplaces. This affected the community heavily, as perhaps up to 30 per cent of the population,

mostly younger Saints, left the island in search of better job opportunities.

What does all this mean for the sociolinguistic development of the variety and how can we use socio-historical information to assess its status? First of all, it is important to note that StHE formed in an environment that was diverse and heterogeneous. Its most influential founders came from the British Southeast and Madagascar (with little, often insignificant, input from other groups). They interacted on a regular basis, though they were socially stratified, being either employees of the EIC or free or indentured planters, and carried different social statuses in the general community and their local communities (there existed differences between indentured labourers vs. free planters, government and administrative staff vs. soldiers, free blacks vs. slaves, Company slaves vs. planter slaves; cf. Schreier, 2008); some were transient (army personnel, practically all of the planters in the seventeenth century), others permanent (particularly so the slaves, whites only from the 1720s onwards). In terms of linguistic development, there is evidence that several varieties were spoken side by side: English, Portuguese, French, Malagasy, plus a number of non-identifiable Indian and African languages. Consequently, this supports Wilson & Mesthrie's (2004:1006) assessment that 'present-day St Helena English is the result of the contact between regional varieties of Southern British English, many of them "non-standard", and the rudimentary pidgin English ("slave fort English") that some slaves must have brought to the island', but it challenges it at the same time. While the identification of StHE's British heritage is certainly correct, the other inputs that contributed to language evolution on St Helena were much more than mere 'slave fort English', so that the scenario is much more complex.

Moreover, whereas the white population has always been English-speaking (or shifted to English quickly, e.g. the group of French Huguenots), the slaves maintained their languages while speaking English at an early stage of settlement history. There are attestations of individual bilingualism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Portuguese in the early 1800s and Malagasy in the second half of the eighteenth century). Though the slaves continued using their own native languages amongst themselves, court records from the 1680s and 1690s suggest that nearly all of them had at

least a rudimentary knowledge of English. At the same time, the slave community was stratified very early on (the distinction between slaves and freemen may have been an important factor here) and the blacks displayed diversity in English just as the whites did. Those immersed in and highly respected by the white community (such as house slaves or black freemen) were more acrolectal, whereas farm slaves housed with planter families in the more rural parts of the island were more basilectal (Schreier, 2008:133–4). In any case, English has served as a lingua franca in a multilingual environment from the earliest stages of the community onwards and language shift was completed in the nineteenth century, when St Helena had become 'an exclusively English speaking colony' (Schulenburg & Schulenburg, 1997:7). This must have been favoured by increased interaction patterns between the ethnic groups, which started in the 1750s and intensified when slavery was abolished in 1818 (see above).

St Helenian English (StHE)

To return to purpose of this paper, the question is: what does this mean for the validity of Kachru's model for LKVEs, or alternatively, where does StHE fit in (if at all)? It is probably easier to approach this from the opposite angle and ask where it does *not* fit. Languages other than English are not spoken on St Helena (with the exception of foreign languages taught at school, e.g. French or German, and perhaps some Afrikaans) and there is no bi- or multilingualism on the island. So, as a matter of consequence, StHE should be listed on a par with British, American, Australian English etc., along the following lines:

- it has long-standing historical continuity (almost 350 years, which in fact makes the oldest variety of Southern Hemisphere English more than a century older than Australian English),
- it is spoken natively (bilingualism is restricted and most of the population speak StHE only),
- English is the language of government, administration, trade and education, etc.

All of these factors call for a classification as an Inner Circle variety.

Notwithstanding, and here it gets more complicated, there are also substantial differences

Some prominent features of StHE (adapted from Schreier 2008, ch. 5)

- indefinite articles are frequently absent: “they used to cut the head off the gunny bag and cut Ø hole in each side”, “she had to get Ø operation”. In some cases, definite articles are present where one would not expect them: “she was infected in the leg, all from the diabetes”, “they come out for the Christmas”
- ‘indeterminate one’, i.e. one instead of an indefinite article: “They say one iron gate there”, “You see that house yonder? Live one missus there.”
- associative plural dem/n’ dem with agent nouns and animate subjects: “they stay over there my daddy n’ dem, you know”
- first person plural pronoun is quasi-categorically us: “us come up Peak Hill way”, “us had a very saucy school master”
- second person plural pronoun you all/y’all: “one thing I will tell y’all, things was cheap them days”
- locative, spatial and temporal attributives – way, -side, and -time: “that’s Sandy Bay-side”, “I was born over White Gate-way”, “and winter-time you soaking wet ‘fore you got there”
- -ed past tense affixation of regular verbs is frequently absent: “I never walkØ around much them days”, “she passØ it over and I grabØ it as fast as I could”
- mussy is found with infinitives and modal verbs (such as can or could): “Mr Solomon had the mills, you mussy hear about it”, “they mussy take that down and buil’ the house”
- multiple negation: “I a young girl only then, don’t know nothin’ and nowhere none to help me nothin’.”
- copula verbs are absent before personal subject pronouns, NPs, adjectives, locatives, Verb + -ing and gonna: “I Ø on treatment for sugar”, “I Ø happy, I got nothin’ to grumble about”, “tomorrow night he Ø on the station up there”

that would make us hesitate; for one, StHE is a restructured variety that has evolved via extensive dialect and language contact (see above); though English was the most influential input variety (hence shift and death of all other languages spoken), varieties such as Malagasy had an influence and considerably shaped the eventual outcome of the formation process. As a result, StHE shares a number of characteris-

tics with English-derived creoles though it is far from clear whether or not it should be classified as a creole or (discussion in Schreier, 2008; cf. Schneider’s (1990) analysis of Caribbean creoles with reference to prototype theory). One elegant way out of the dilemma is to distinguish between language-internal and -external criteria, so one could claim that, for the historical reasons outlined, StHE is an Inner Circle variety, whereas it differs from the other varieties on linguistic and sociolinguistic grounds. Such an approach is of particular appeal since it allows us to make a distinction between American and British English on the one hand and a number of smaller varieties such as Bahamian English, Bajan or Pitcairnesse on the other hand (for which one might make similar cases in point as well). This seems like a most promising explanation, since it allows for considerable variation within the circles and calls for a more comprehensive analysis, viewing diversification of English around the world not only as a socio-historical but also as a linguistic process.

Conclusion

I would argue that LKVEs, exemplified by StHE, challenge existing models and ask us to revise them, since they fit for some reasons and at the same time stand apart for others. We need to differentiate language-external and -internal components of diversification in English around the world, be more fine-grained in our analysis and make it very clear whether or not we base our judgments on structural considerations or on historical and social ones, which, at the end of the day, may lead to different results. In this sense, the study of English around the world – and its taxonomic implications – may benefit considerably from the analysis of varieties we know little about: they encourage us to rethink principles that have been applied in the past while forcing us at the same time to assess their significance for the classification of English in the future. ■

References

- Crystal, David. 1997. *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Davies, Alan. 2004. ‘The native speaker in applied linguistics.’ In Davies, Alan and Catherine Elder, (eds.) *The handbook of applied linguistics*. New York: Blackwell.
- Görlach, Manfred. 1990. *Studies in the History of the English Language*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter.

- Gosse, Philip. 1938. *St Helena, 1502–1938*. London: Cassell.
- Hackert, Stefanie. fc. *The native speaker in World Englishes*. Habilitationsschrift, University of Regensburg, Germany.
- Kachru, Braj B. 1985. 'Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the Outer Circle.' In Randolph Quirk & Heenry G. Widdowson (eds.) *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literatures*. Cambridge: University Press. pp. 11–30.
- . 1986. *The Alchemy of English: The spread, functions and models of non-native English*. Oxford: Pergamon. Reprinted 1990. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- McArthur, Tom. 1987. 'The English languages?' *English Today* 11: 9–11.
- Melliss, John C. 1875. *St. Helena: A Physical, Historical, and Topographical Description of the Island, Including Its Geology, Fauna, Flora, and Meteorology*. London: Reeve and Co.
- Mesthrie, Rajend & Bhatt, Rakesh M. 2008. *World Englishes: The Study of New Linguistic Variables*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Schneider, Edgar W. 1990. 'The cline of creoleness in English-oriented creoles and semi-creoles of the Caribbean.' *English World-Wide* 11, 79–113.
- Schreier, Daniel. 2008. *St Helenian English: Origins, evolution and variation*. (Series Varieties of English around the World G37). Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- , Trudgill, Peter, Schneider, Edgar, and Williams, Jeffrey P. (eds). fc. *The Lesser-known Varieties of English: An Introduction*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Schulenburg, Helmut & Schulenburg, Alexander. 1997. *St Helena, South Atlantic Ocean*. Allersberg: Jacob-Gilardi-Verlag.
- Wilson, Sheila & Mesthrie, Rajend. 2004. 'St. Helena English: morphology and syntax.' In Bernd Kortmann, Edgar W. Schneider, Rajend Mesthrie & Kate Burridge, (eds), *A Handbook of Varieties of English. A Multimedia Reference Tool*. Vol. 2: *Morphology and Syntax*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 1006–15.
-