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# The Asian Corpus of English: Motivation and Aims

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## Abstract

In this paper I shall give a brief description of the Asian Corpus of English (ACE) and the motivations and aims behind collating it. ACE is a corpus of English spoken as a lingua franca among multilinguals in Asian settings. Many of the contributors to the corpus are speakers of Asian varieties of English, some of which have been described and also represented in the International Corpora of English (ICE). ICE currently includes corpora of Hong Kong English, Indian English, Filipino English, Singaporean English and Sri Lankan English (<http://ice-corpora.net/ice/index.htm>). Why, then, do we need a corpus of Asian ELF?

## Keywords

The Asian Corpus of English, World of Englishes, International Corpora of English

## I Introduction

There are currently more non-native speakers of English than there are native speakers of it. If one considers the total population of the so-called BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) group and that English is the major means through which people from within this group communicate with each other, one can start to develop a picture of just how comprehensively English has been adopted as the international lingua franca.

This is, of course, also true within the Asian context, where most speakers of English in the Asian region are 'English-knowing' multilinguals (Pakir 2000) who are more likely to use English with fellow English-knowing multilinguals, than they are with people who speak native-speaker varieties. Indeed the role of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in ASEAN has recently been officially sanctioned with the signing, in 2009, of the ASEAN Charter (Kirkpatrick 2010a). Article 34 of the Charter reads 'the working language of ASEAN shall be English'. This privileged status of English within the ASEAN community, is another reason why a study of Asian ELF is so important.

The increasing use of English as a lingua franca (EL) in Asia has led one scholar to

estimate that there are more than 800 million English users within Asia (Bolton 2008:7). Speakers in the countries included in the ASEAN + 3 (China, Korea, Japan) grouping comprise some 450 million English-knowing multilinguals. These figures further serve to illustrate the importance of English as a lingua franca and to underline that the great majority of the world's speakers of English are multilinguals for whom English is an additional language. To paraphrase Mauranen, if we want to understand the use of English in today's world, 'ELF must be one of the central concerns in this line of research' (2006:147).

A key issue is the controversy over the very definition and existence of English as a lingua franca. Opponents of ELF argue that the language used by non-native speakers of English in reciprocal conversation is, in effect, learner English, and deficient in that the language use deviates from native speaker norms (cf. Elder and Davies 2006). They thus argue that a standardised English should always provide the teaching norm. Others argue that ELF describes a language function rather than a form, and that ELF cannot therefore be classified as a distinct variety (e.g., Mollin 2006, Prodromou 2007, Saraceni 2011). Corpora of ELF can shed light on these issues. For example, while the arguments noted above appear to have some merit, recent work on the development of ELF is showing a remarkable number of shared non-standard linguistic features (e.g., Seidlhofer 2007, 2011, Mauranen and Ranta 2009, Cogo & Dewey 2012). Kirkpatrick (2008, 2010a) and Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) also report that the ELF of ASEAN speakers shares certain linguistic features. ELF, despite being used by speakers of different linguistic backgrounds, thus comprises a number of shared linguistic features, including the non-marking of tense forms. This is of particular potential interest as it has been argued that corpora of learner English can provide evidence of how the L1 of the learners can be identified through their use of errors. For example, Granger explains that the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) 'Is an ideal resource to establish the importance of transfer in SLA' (2003:541) and that 'On a more theoretical level, the ICLE data can be used...to give SLA theories a more solid empirical foundation, in particular as regards the important question of L1 transfer' (2003: 544). A recent study investigating whether the L1 can be determined by the learners' errors has suggested error patterns 'can indeed be used as a reliable source of information in L1 profiling studies' (Bestgen, Granger & Thewissen 2012). Tono (2010) argues that the relative ease with which Japanese learners acquire the possessive '-s' in English, and that the relative difficulty with which they acquire the article system can be explained by positive transfer from Japanese in the first instance – Japanese has a possessive marker '-no' which operates very like the English possessive marker - and negative transfer with regard the article system, as Japan has no article system (2010:162). As suggested above, however, studies based on the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) and ACE indicate that while the L1 has some influence, the use of certain non-standard morpho-syntactic forms is not necessarily a

reliable indicator of the user's L1. A potentially significant difference between the learner and ELF corpora is that the former are comprised of written texts while the latter are spoken corpora. The role of the L1 or substrate language on the formation of non-standard forms as opposed to the existence of universal non-standard forms caused perhaps by motivations such as simplification and regularisation has been a matter of debate among linguists for decades, if not centuries. An important question that ELF research needs to consider, therefore, is what accounts for the many shared but non-standard features of ELF, and I return to discuss this more below.

## II The Asian Corpus of English (ACE)

ACE is a corpus of naturally occurring spoken English used as a lingua franca (ELF). The great majority of participants are Asians, primarily from the countries of East and Southeast Asia, who are using English to communicate with each other in natural settings. ACE comprises about one million words (equivalent to about 110 hours of recorded data). To date 100% of the data has been collected and 50% of that has been transcribed. It is hoped that ACE will be ready for international release by the end of 2013. Nine teams in eight countries are currently involved in the ACE project, namely:

Ateneo de Manila University, the Philippines  
 Chukyo University, Japan  
 Griffith University, Brisbane (project leader)  
 Guangxi University, Nanning, China  
 Institute of Education, Hong Kong  
 National Institute of Education, Singapore  
 SEAMEO RETRAC, HCM City, Vietnam  
 University of Brunei  
 University of Malaya

ACE aims to provide a truly representative sample of English as used as an Asian lingua franca and, as far as possible, seeks to meet the following criteria.

- (i) gender: an equal balance between male and female participants;
- (ii) inclusive – ACE data is sourced from a region rich in its diversity. The aim is to make the corpus representative of this diversity;
- (iii) genre balance – the speech events include educational, leisure, business and scientific settings;
- (iv) a range of types of events – including regular conversations, interviews, meetings, panels, news conferences, Q and A sessions, seminars, service encounters and discussions;
- (v) geographical spread – data should be collected from representative sites across

East and SE Asia:

- (vi) linguistic balance – the data needs to represent the diverse linguistic backgrounds of East and SE Asia (Patkin 2011: 10).

Once the data has been collected, it is transcribed using VoiceScribe, developed by the VOICE team. Different mark ups, like intonation, emphasis, laughter are marked and shown in symbols of different colours. John Patkin, the chief transcriber of ACE, has produced a user friendly manual for researchers who wish to use Voicscribe (Patkin 2011).

The research tools involved in the progress of data analysis are WordSmith and ConcGram. The former is lexical analysis software comprising an integrated suite of programs for looking at how words behave in texts. One of the basic uses of WordSmith is to generate a list of all the words or word-clusters in a text, set out in alphabetical or frequency order. ConcGram is innovative corpus linguistics software, the main function of which is to act as a phraseological search engine, which is able to identify up to five co-occurring words in a text or corpus, irrespective of either constituency or positional variation (Greaves 2010).

The question of who could become part of ACE is a question that the research team debated for some time. In the end we decided that, unlike with learner corpora such as ICLE and ICNALE (Ishikawa 2011), not to establish English language proficiency criteria for participants. As ACE data all comes from naturally occurring speech events which have been set up independently from the corpus team and to which all participants were volunteers, we decided that their very presence at these speech events would qualify people for the corpus. Naturally all participants were able to say that they did not want to be part of the corpus, but very few exercised this wish.

A further difference between learner corpora and ELF corpora is epistemological, if not ideological. Most learner corpora are developed in order to identify learner errors. Errors are judged against native speaker norms and models. In the context of ELF use and the subsequent corpora, this use of native speaker norms as the linguistic benchmark against which ‘correctness’ is judged would present problems. First, the presence of native speaker varieties of English means that there are several native speaker ‘norms’. The American ‘different than’ and the British ‘different from / to’ is but one example. Second, the presence of so many non-standard forms in all vernacular varieties of English suggests that, in the spoken world at least, variation is the rule rather than the exception. As Britain has pointed out in his discussion of vernacular varieties of British English, ‘Standard English is a minority dialect in England’ (2010:37). Third, the development of newer varieties of English – many of which are Asian-based – have speakers who have learned English as an additional language, and these Englishes naturally have to reflect the cultures and lived experience of their speakers (Kirkpatrick 2007a). This reflection will include the borrowing of words,

idioms, methods of expression from local languages. This is also true, of course of inner circle native speaker varieties of English. For example, Australian English has borrowed many Aboriginal words (including the 'iconic', kangaroo, koala and boomerang). Australian English is also characterised by 'clipping', the shortening of words and ending them with vowel sounds. 'Don't forget to bring an eskie and your cossie to the barbie this arvo' could be an utterance in Australian English. In Australian English this use of clipping reflects the Australian value of informality. We would expect all varieties of English to behave in this way, and while I don't believe anyone 'owns' a variety of English, speakers of varieties have the right to create their own norms.

A fourth reason why judging ELF against native speaker norms is inappropriate is that the majority of ELF users are multilinguals who are using English with fellow multilinguals. The students of the Waseda course and the audience here today provide excellent examples of this. Given this, it is the ability to use English successfully in multilingual contexts that becomes the key benchmark for success for multilingual speakers. As Garcia has argued, we should avoid 'the inequities' in measuring multilingual speakers against monolinguals (2009:386). McKay goes further, saying, 'Reliance on a native speaker model as the pedagogical target must be set aside' (2009:238). As studies on ELF corpora are beginning to illustrate, the use of non-standard forms does not necessarily impinge on communication. Indeed, the use of certain non-standard forms – for example a tendency towards syllable timing as opposed to the stress-timing of traditional native-speaker varieties of English – far from hindering communication, may actually enhance it (Deterding and Kirkpatrick 2006).

In addition to describing how Asian multilinguals use English, an important aim of ACE is to allow researchers to compare Asian ELF use with European ELF use, as described in the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) and discussed further below. ACE is being collected and transcribed following VOICE protocols and the transcription software, VoiceScribe, developed by the VOICE team, to ensure that researchers will be able to reliably and easily compare data from both corpora.

In general terms, ACE should thus be able to provide data for researchers to investigate questions such as:

- (i) The role of the first language on the use of non-standard morpho-syntactic forms in ELF.
- (ii) The extent to which the universal hypothesis, which proposes that vernacular universals realised as certain non-standard forms occur in all varieties of English, can be supported/rejected.
- (iii) The extent to which English can and does act as a conduit for Asian cultural values and norms.
- (iv) Whether there are significant differences between the VOICE and ACE data and, if so, what might be the causes of any differences.

The findings have potential significance for linguistic research as the debate between the influence of language contact on the speaker's second language (in this case, English) and/or the existence of vernacular universals across all varieties of spoken English is one of the most controversial areas of debate in contemporary linguistics.

The findings also have potential significant implications for English language teaching in the region. For, in addition to the possible findings mentioned above, the ACE will also provide information about how speakers negotiate meaning. This will include, for example, whether or not the use of non-standard forms cause misunderstandings of breakdowns in communication, and, if so, what types of non-standard forms cause these breakdowns. The types of repair strategies speakers use to overcome any misunderstandings in communication can also be identified and then form possible components of the ELT curriculum (Kirkpatrick 2007b).

As suggested above, if it is shown that ELF speakers, despite their first languages, regularly use shared non-standard forms and that this does not cause problems in communication, the need for learners to acquire standard native speaker norms can be questioned. Instead, multilinguals of similar linguistic backgrounds to the students might provide more appropriate models than native speakers for such learners. In addition, if it is shown that Asian ELF users regularly discuss Asian cultures, this suggests that the language teachers do not need to be native speakers of English who can act as insider guides to the target culture, because the target culture (s) are not those normally associated with Anglophone speakers or contexts. On the contrary, it could be argued that Asian multilinguals who are able to impart to their students an Asian form of intercultural competence represent the more appropriate language teachers in these contexts for these learners. A preliminary study (Kirkpatrick, Patkin and Wu 2013) discovered that the topics discussed by participants in selected sections of the ACE were overwhelmingly Asian-focused. It is not surprising, of course, that Asians should choose to discuss Asian-focussed topics. As indicated above, this is extremely significant for language teaching. In these 'post Anglo-cultural' contexts, Asian multilinguals with knowledge of regional cultures are likely to make more appropriate English language teachers. At the same time, English language curricula and materials need to take into consideration the needs and interests of local learners and speakers of English who will be primarily using English to communicate with fellow Asian multilinguals. In short the findings have the potential of radically altering our understanding of the way English is currently being used in East and Southeast Asia and thus radically altering the way in English should be taught in these settings.

Two significant ELF corpora collected in Europe have already begun to answer some of the questions raised above. The Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE), collected by a team led by Professor Seidlhofer at the University of Vienna (<http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/>), represents some one million words of naturally

occurring English used as a lingua franca across Europe. The speakers are primarily, though not exclusively, speakers of European languages. It was made freely available in 2011. There is also the ELFA corpus of academic English collected by Anna Mauranen and her team at the University of Helsinki. Members of the research teams have already published some findings (e.g., Cogo & Dewey 2012, Seidlhofer 2011, Breiteneder 2005, 2009, Mauranen & Ranta 2009, and the 2009 special edition of *Intercultural Pragmatics* on ‘The pragmatics of English as a lingua franca.’)

In terms of syntax, the following non-standard forms have been attested:

- (i) the non-marking of the third person singular with ‘-s’;
- (ii) interchangeability of the relative pronouns, ‘who’ and ‘which’;
- (iii) flexible use of definite and indefinite articles;
- (iv) extended use of ‘general’ or common verbs;
- (v) treating uncountable nouns as plural;
- (vi) use of a uniform question tag;
- (vii) use of demonstrative ‘this’ with both singular and plural nouns;
- (viii) use of prepositions in different contexts.

What is interesting is that some of these forms are also found in vernacular varieties of British English and other varieties of English. To cite once more from Britian’s description of vernacular varieties of British English, ‘every corner of the country demonstrates a wide range of grammatically non-standard forms, reminding us that such forms are the rule rather than the exception in spoken English English’ (2010:53).

Chambers (2004:129) has gone as far as to argue that there are vernacular universals, claiming that the following non-standard forms occur in all vernaculars of all varieties of English:

- 1 alveolar substitution in final unstressed ‘ing’ (walkin’);
- 2 morpheme final consonant cluster simplification (pos’office);
- 3 final obstruent devoicing (hundred – hundret; cupboard – cubbert);
- 4 conjugation regularization or leveling of irregular verb forms (yesterday John seen the eclipse; Mary heard the good news);
- 5 default singulars or subject-verb nonconcord (they was the last ones);
- 6 multiple negation of negative concord (he didn’t see nothing);
- 7 copula absence or deletion (she smart; we going as soon as possible).

It is thus impossible to classify ELF as a deficient form of English solely on the grounds of the presence of non-standard forms, especially when many of the non-standard forms found in ELF are also found in other varieties of English. In the example from ACE of Asian ELF below, an Indonesian (Ind) is talking to a Burmese (Bur). The Indonesian speaker uses some simple past tense standard forms, but she also uses some non-standard forms. These are all underlined.

Ind: I waited] for the official who pick me up ok er and then I tried to look for the official but because er er the plane you know landed so early so (ehm uh oh) the official hadn't come yet (C: ehm) yeah

Bur: what a pity (laugh)

Ind: er er I I I had to stay in the airport and then did nothing (C: ehm) just sit and I check the placard of (ehm) RELC (M: ehm) ok and er and I couldn't see that's why I just sit and take a rest...what about you what time...?

Often the non-marking of the past tense ‘-ed’ in spoken English has a phonological explanation. While this may explain the non-marking of ‘pick’ in the first line, it can’t explain the non-marking of the irregular verbs in the final line, ‘sit’ and ‘take’. The fact that speakers appear to choose to mark or not to mark these inflections is important, as it shows that the use of non-standard forms does not mean that the speaker is unaware of or unable to use standard forms. Similar results have been reported for the VOICE corpus (Breiteneder 2005) and elsewhere (Li 2007). The use of the non-standard form does not mean that the speaker does not know the standard form, nor does it mean that she does not know how to use the standard form.

All this raises questions about the causes of language change and the existence of non-standard forms. Not surprisingly, given the complexity of the topic, there is significant disagreement among linguists. The suggestion above for vernacular universals made by Chambers has been disputed by Szendrői and Kortmann who have argued that the morphosyntactic features found in their survey of 46 varieties of English may be caused for different reasons in different languages (2009). Variables such as linguistic typology, where in the world the language is spoken and language contact may all play a part in the development of specific grammatical features. Mufwene (2009) feels that language contact is crucial, with the level of contact being a matter of degree. Thomason cautions that ‘many linguistic changes involve both kinds of process – that is, various processes of contact-induced change and also universal tendencies of various kinds’ (2009:349).

Scholars are also currently debating whether variety type or geography – and thus the influence of the contact languages – is the better predictor of distinctive syntactic features. While showing that many new varieties of English share distinctive linguistic features, Mesthrie and Bhatt argue that some varieties prefer to delete certain features while other varieties prefer to retain them. They give Singaporean English with its allowance of subject deletion as an example of a ‘deleter’ and African languages as good examples of ‘retainers’ (2008:108). Kortmann, on the other hand, while allowing that geography plays an important role, argues that it is variety type – whether the variety is an L1 or an indigenised non-native L2 or a creole, for example – which better predicts the morphosyntactic features of the variety (2010).

It is important to stress that contact with other languages has always been a major cause of linguistic change in English. English has never been ‘untouched’ by other languages. ‘The notion of purity was as mythical then as it is now’ (Crystal 2004:19). Languages that have left their mark on English include Classical Greek, Latin, French, Scandinavian languages and many others.

Simplification is one change that takes place over time, as illustrated in the simplification of the inflectional system of English. Speakers of standard British English use far fewer inflections than their ancestors. The highly inflected English of Old English has become, over time, a modern English with only a few inflections (Blake 1996).

Simplification is joined by a second motivation for change, namely, regularization. There is a tendency for past tense endings of English verbs to become regular over time. Thus for example, ‘worked’ is now accepted as the standard past tense form of ‘work’ , while at one time the irregular form ‘wrought’ was used. ‘Raught’ was common for the past tense for ‘reach’ until about 1650 (Lass 1999: 174). When considering the linguistic features of new varieties of English, it is important, therefore, to consider whether they may be the result of simplification or regularization, especially with the unmarking of tense and the non-use of other inflectional items.

In summary, the relationship between vernacular universals and language contacts and the extent that these can be identified as causes of language change are key questions in contact linguistics (Filppula, Klemola and Paulasto 2009:8). The significance and innovation of ACE and other ELF corpora is that the findings may help disentangle some of these complexities, as well as illustrating the non-standard forms routinely used in Asian ELF communication and will allow us to suggest some implications of these for English language teaching in the region.

### III VOICE and ACE: findings compared

To underline just how complex the issue is concerning the relative importance of L1 influence vis a vis other causes of language change, preliminary findings are demonstrating some differences in the use of non-standard forms – in particular in their frequency - between the VOICE and ACE corpora. Both corpora illustrate the non-marking of third person singular, the extended use of common verbs, the use of a uniform question tag, demonstrative ‘this’ with plural nouns, and the use of ‘different’ prepositions.

Non-standard forms found more frequently in VOICE than in ACE include the interchangeability of ‘who’, ‘which’, the flexible use of definite/indefinite articles, and treating uncountable nouns as plural.

Non-standard forms found more frequently in ACE than in VOICE include the base form of the verb for past tense, the omission of articles, the omission of the copula ‘be’

and the omission of the plural 's'. Example 'screen shots' of each are:

*Base form of the verb for past tense*

- very lazy but then [first name5] said that he **want** then hh S2: no aha S1: just ask just e-mail
- S2: mhm: S1: but even though he enjoyed and he **want** to go S2: @@ S1: yeah always missing (1)
- 14 tsk she said lah then she kept replying then she **say** how can you erm sue how can you call
- him erm S2: yes erm er he he **say** that er erm he **ask** me for help teaching

*Omission of 'be'*

- from [place3] S1: this (.) **this our traditional things**= S2: =that's cor
- fish S3: it looks like the (.)? @ ah S1: yah **this our one of our main dish** S3: @@ main dis
- of your apples= S2: =eh eh it's very cool <5> **this very cool** S1: hey they are saying
- 1: but looks too young already S2: <2> **this the tutorial** that that he er that he
- his guy oh yeah oh this one also very stupid **this one very stupid** it's become better less
- m right S2: veRY S1: very very slim eh h but **this one very obvious** they very slim eh my
- s one ah ah ah ah i saw this before this one **this one very special** (.) never tried before
- ery very slim eh h but this one very obvious **they very slim** eh my face become like long @
- e very rich S2: they @@@ S4: yeah **they very rich** S3: those of (he) even in coll
- then when they see people enjoy the food **they very happy** no ah right S1: yeah S2: that
- hy i was asking i was asking all the guys eh **they very funny** @ S3: @@ h S1: yeah so hard of course can ask aha but just scared **they very busy** i talk fifteen minutes not so

*Omission of Articles*

- the good student to be more active in helping **teacher** to help some weaker student to improve
- erm band two will be the easier for for **teacher** to deal with to handle with because
- role of teacher? I mean what's the role of **teacher** in classroom?

*Omission of plural 's'*

- is test you know h you know the teachers and **student** they greater h they greater emphasis
- greater emphasis on it er h so teachers and **student** on purpose er h learn some test
- any scores yeah too much of it to to attract **student** come to class yeah because
- in school as well you can cos it will attract **student** to choose something hh they really want
- that is why some of the it **student** you see them getting offer more than
- maybe he was one of the good **student** the best student in the class S1: ye
- think about different way of motivating her **student** that is the start planning right star

#### IV ACE and ELF: Possible Implications for ELT

I have elsewhere (e.g., Kirkpatrick 2012) proposed a 'lingua franca' approach for the teaching of English and suggested eight principles and here briefly summarise those relevant to the discussion above.

First, in the context of using English as a lingua franca in Asian settings, consideration needs to be given to developing criteria which define a successful user of English and that these might compliment, if not replace, the traditional aim of the English learner approximating native speaker norms. A more socio-cultural perspective to language teaching and learning needs to be taken into consideration alongside the more traditional second language acquisition paradigm (Larsen-Freeman 2007). Second, as the topics – and the cultures associated with them – are primarily Asian, then the English language teacher needs to be able to instil intercultural competence, primarily in Asian cultures, among the learners.

Both these ideas suggest that the local, well-trained and culturally aware teacher whose English language proficiency is high represents the more appropriate English teacher than does the native speaker. This challenges the traditional view that the native speaker is necessarily the more appropriate teacher, a view which remains strongly held in many Asian settings.

However, it must be stressed that these are early days in the development and analysis of ELF corpora and early findings are suggesting that, as might be expected, things are often far more complex than they seem. Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that research based on ELF corpora such as ACE will provide findings and insights into the use of English by multilingual speakers of English as an additional language, which will then inform English language curricula and intercultural communication.

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