European English Varieties: a Contribution to the Study of the Characteristics of Nativisation Processes

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Introduction

It seems to be the general consensus that it is advantageous to adapt one language for communicating within a wide international community. As stated by Pamela Rogerson-Revell, this has been a constant fact, especially in the world of business:

Historically, the development of any language as a lingua franca or pidgin to facilitate communication between speakers of different languages has often been initiated by international commerce or trade. In fact the word ‘pidgin’ is said to be derived from the Chinese pronunciation of the English word business and Pidgin English was the name given to a Chinese–English–Portuguese pidgin used for commerce in Canton during the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries. (104)

In fact, this author adapts the term English for International Business (EIB) (104) to refer to the “use of English as a common language in business” in contexts where native English speakers and speakers of other languages need to communicate to conduct businesses.

There is, moreover, no shortage of terms to try to describe how the English language is being used across the world: English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), English as an International Language (EIL), Global English, International English, and even Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF), by L. Louhiala-Salmien et. al. (403). Terminology aside, the reality of global business seems to be involving the English language more than ever, making it the “international language” in the sense offered by Seidhöfer:

“International English” can be read as shorthand for “English as an international language” (EIL). The longer the term, however, though more unwieldy, more precise because it
highlights the international use of English rather than suggesting, wrongly, that there is one clearly distinguishable, unitary variety called “International English". (8)

In Europe, however, there is a growing sense that, because of the role of the European Community, where diversity and unity are in constant search for equilibrium, particularly in the case of language use, non-native English has acquired distinct characteristics. Back in 1980, Carstensen (832) had already raised the issue by suggesting an investigation into the English spoken by European politicians in the European Community when Berns (6) wrote about the “discoursal nativization” of English, especially in written texts, as one of three characteristics of English usage in Europe. This phenomenon is seen when “texts use English lexis and syntax, but maintain conventions of the native language and culture (e.g., rhetorical pattern, argument structure, or coherence markers) for the composition of the text” (Berns 6). Branded “Euro-English” or “European English”, it refers to the English language used by non-British Europeans, which seems to have distinct features from those found in inner circle varieties (Kachru 12).1

Apparently straightforward, this point of view is not unproblematic since it is rooted on the principle that every language mirrors the speakers’ culture, be it native or foreign. Although aware that a foreign language is a “borrowed language”, i.e., not the speaker’s mother tongue, the approach followed in this article agrees with that of L. Louhiala-Salmi et. al. (404), Meierkord (110) as well as Christopher N. Candlin and Maurizio Gotti (6), which states that language is inseparable from a given socio-cultural configuration even when it is used for business communication:

[...] in business communication, an area in which English represents a means of contact and interaction among people from different cultures allowing concrete common goals to be negotiated and achieved, the recurrent use of this language —

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1 Kachru’s inner circle contains English as the native language of the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, considered the norm provider. He contrasts it with the outer circle, which can be linked to the English language spoken in the countries of the second Diaspora and the expanding circle, which includes the countries using English as an international language.
while guaranteeing an international and global dimension —
is necessarily culturally marked and consequently requires
some kind of adaptation on the part of interactants. (6)

Business in European English

As stated, there is a growing use for English in the international business
world, especially when there is a mixture of speakers of different countries
involved. An example can be observed in the mould making business in
Portugal. This is a market where 95% of all moulds for the plastics industry
built in this country are sold to countries all over the world, which requires
the use of the English language in over 85% of the situations. The written
correspondence between mould makers and mould buyers can offer an
opportunity to verify the presence of the linguistic characteristics marked
by differences of cultural background. As such, a corpus of 210 business
emails, totalling over 19 700 words, received from six different countries
European companies, as well as 226 messages with circa 26 500 words,
from twelve Portuguese companies was chosen to initiate the study of some
features which can indicate if there are specific characteristics in the English
language from each European country.

Before tackling this issue, a number of considerations had to be taken
into account. For example, it is important to establish what constitutes a
grammatical characteristic of a variety of Euro-English, which is marked by
some type of deviation from the norm, and distinguish it from the ignorance
of grammar rules and their wrongful applications. The question still remains
of how much a norm can be bent before it can be qualified an error as
opposed to a trait. In the case of this study, two basic rules were followed:
it was considered to be a mistake when the deviation from the norm was
used occasionally by a random writer; it was taken as an example of a
variety if the feature was repeated often by the writers of the same country.

One other factor encountered and dealt with was the variety of
English followed by the authors of the emails. Although British English
spelling was mostly used, a substantial number of emails displayed
American spelling. Since this fact only shows the influence of both varieties
on the individual writer, it was not given special importance for the purpose
of this study.
A third point worthy of attention is the fact that the corpus is made up of emails, a means of communication usually placed between the oral and the written. It is chosen for its rapid form of contacting the other, such as a telephone conversation, but it is, on the other hand, a written mode. As a consequence, the use of text revision, or the degree of formality of language are choices belonging to the writers alone, according to specific contexts and sets of circumstances unknown to anyone else, making it difficult for an outsider to establish what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate use of language.

The emails in this study are characterised by a great mixture of styles. There are some telegraphic messaging, which apply no unnecessary wording, such as: “we need to test and see if it is ok; if ok, then finished.”, “Do it like with the Lago — looks nicer”, “If until now no answer, go on with it” or “If no answer no logo”. On the other hand, there are some messages which are the complete opposite, for example: “I have checked the file and noticed the problem with the undercut. I do not think it is a problem to change it but I must check with the customer anyway”, with no abbreviations or shortened sentences.

The background of the email authors is also important. They are mould technicians who have one common interest — moulds for plastics — but who will have had different English learning experiences. The fact still remains that their knowledge of the language is close enough to the norm to have allowed them to successfully communicate with each other in written English.

Three specific characteristics were investigated: the first is connected with word order and the use of adverbs, the consistent cross over of grammar peculiarities and the third tries to find some unique vocabulary loan words from any country, as suggested by Carstensen (831).

The Netherlands

Tom McArthur (146) pointed out that many Dutch companies already use English, especially the multinational companies, while it is a compulsory language for all children in school. In the very near future, most Dutch people will be bilingual, at least. The ten Dutch technicians who wrote these 83 messages, containing 5 637 words, have shown to be an example
of this fact, as they seem to be well acquainted with the English language. Their sentence structure usually follows the British English norm, although some misspellings and other inaccuracies were found, which can mostly be considered typos and the result of sending the email without spell check or proofreading. The only mistake more often is some inconsistent use of prepositions, such as the following examples taken from these emails: “We are also waiting on quality tests”; “If you look to the stacking” and “according your planning”. These mistakes, however, are not used in a specific manner and are not used by a large enough number of technicians. On the contrary, most writers make correct use of prepositions.

While looking for possible features that could be attributed to Dutch English, a specific pattern of word order seemed to be emerging every time the word “already” was used, as seen in the following example: “they are good enough to start already the global construction”, where the word is usually placed after the infinitive. Although only three such occurrences were counted, they were made by three different writers. To confirm this possibility more English texts written by Dutch authors must be analysed.

Another inconsistency was noticed, also connected with that word. Although the writers normally use the present perfect whenever necessary, as in the examples, “you have quoted these”, “We have checked”, “I have written the order” and “we have sent it today by DHL”, in the instances where “already” is used, this does not happen: “we already lost two weeks” and “we already informed you”. Although it could be argued that there is American influence, it is nevertheless the only instant where this influence is observed and it is used by two different writers.

As far as vocabulary is concerned, there was not any specific example that came to light. Because the subject of these emails is mould making, many words used are technical, but the use of terminology is consistent with that of other technicians in other countries. On the other hand, the non-specialised vocabulary showed that eight of the ten technicians have dropped the capital letter when writing the days of the week and the months of the year. Again, these are only a few instances, which need to be further studied in order to be confirmed.
Sweden

The four Swedish technicians have also dropped the capital letter when writing the days of the week. This was a consistency in the fifty emails, totalling over 4 100 words, which make up the Swedish corpus. They also follow the British variety of English, for the most part with few mistakes, one of which being the repeated lack of the third person “s” of the simple present on the part of one technician and the incorrect addition of an “s” to the word “information” on the part of another. Occasionally, they have also made the wrong choice of prepositions, such as, for example, on the sentence “Nothing has been changed at the mould” and “I have looked on the mould and I see […]”.

When the word order of sentences that include adverbs was analysed, there were some sentences that stood out: “we have today sent a mail [...]”, “we sent you yesterday information [...]” and “we have today sent you the cavities”. Upon further analysis, it was noticed that all such examples were written by the same technician, making it a personal habit and not a possible language trait.

In the case of the Swedish messages, it seems that the characteristics of the English language in use are directly linked to the specific style of the writer. No repeated borrowing or pattern was noticed.

Belgium

The same way as the Dutch technicians have made a differentiated use of the perfectives, so have the six Belgian technicians who wrote the seventeen messages, containing over 5 500 words. Although they made flawless use of the present perfect in all other occasions, whenever the words “just”, “yet” or “already” were used, they resorted to the use of the simple past, as in the example “we received just the 30 [...]” or “we got already small flash”. American English could, again, be an influence here, but the shift itself could be an emerging pattern in some Euro-English varieties.

It is interesting to notice that three of the technicians, who are associated with one company, follow the British English norm, while the three belonging to the other company follow the American variety. This fact has no influence on the case described above, however, since it was used by technicians in both companies.
The placing of the adverb in the word order is also similar to that seen in the Dutch messages, a characteristic that was repeated with other adverbs as well: “I will verify before next trial the venting”, “We will confirm eventually wall thickness”, “we will confirm eventually adaptations” and “we have still flash”. Although it is very soon to come to any type of conclusion, this occurrence could be verified further in other types of texts.

The English language at work in these texts follows both the British and the American norms very closely, including the use of vocabulary and terminology and very few inaccuracies were found, the exception being a only some imprecise choice of prepositions.

Norway

The thirty-seven Norwegian messages of close to 4 000 words were written by four technicians who followed the British variety closely, although McArthur (149) states that it the American influence that has made a difference in the area. Their use of English is nearly flawless, with the occasional wrong preposition being the exception, and often with the inaccurate use of “at”: “I want it at latest 12.4” or “send me also an updated time schedule at this tool”.

No specific characteristics of grammar, vocabulary or word order were noticed, except for the individual style of one technician who occasionally translated a typical Norwegian greeting, “Dear you!”.

Hungary

The Hungarian messages, totalling twenty three, were signed by three technicians of one company. They made up over 2 100 words and their writing suffered the influence of the British English variety. Occasionally, these technicians also had some problems in using the most appropriate preposition, but other than a few missing letters, their English is not very different from that written by native technicians. These messages have very similar styles, giving the impression that they were proofread by the same person before being sent.

No specific characteristic was observed in these emails in vocabulary, word order and grammar.
Portugal

Because all the foreign emails were answered by Portuguese technicians, they add up to 226 messages, containing close to 27 000 words. According to the information obtained in the Portuguese mould making companies, it is imperative that mould technicians have a good knowledge of the English language, since, as was stated above, nearly all moulds are sold outside the country and are custom made by order of foreign customers. The better the sellers communicate, the better they sell moulds. However, not all technicians have the same level of English: the first generation of workers in this field mostly learned French, not English, in school, and had to study this language as it needed. The next generations had an easier task, as English was already part of the school curriculum and, as a rule, learned the norm of the British variety. This does not mean that the American variety has no influence. On the contrary, because the first international mould buyers were from the US, this variety is regularly used in many Portuguese companies.

Having established that the two varieties are used indiscriminately in this business, the question of a possible variety of Portuguese English needs to be raised. Based on the emails alone, there is no perceptible pattern; there are many individual uses of the English language, where sentence structure, grammar and vocabulary vary from direct translations based on the Portuguese language to near native use of the English language.

Actually, in Portugal, the belief that the closer to native the better the English, still remains and, as such, whenever technicians do not have a good command of this language, they resort to a translator, a practice noticed in some cases. The tendency, then, is for the Portuguese mould technicians to try to speak English as similarly to a native as possible.

Conclusions

After analysing 436 messages, several conclusions can be reached. On one hand, there are countries where the level of English in use is a version which closely resembles a native variety and where any type of local European pattern seems to be completely absent. On the other hand, although the inner circle norm is followed in general, signs of a particular application of
certain adverbs in sentence structure are appearing in the messages of the technicians from two neighbouring countries, The Netherlands and Belgium. To prove this, other texts from various sources must continue to be studied.

Works Cited


**Abstract**

Margie Berns (6-7) states that as a result of the fact that European English is used by a rising number of non-native speakers, their English is becoming more and more distinct from the native speakers' variety. Because this is the language mostly used in European Union institutions and is, simultaneously, the language traditionally used for doing business, Continental Europeans are continuously bending British English so as to convey the full significance of their own language. Consequently, Europeans are communicating in a growing number of European English varieties.

As such, the purpose of this paper is to study a corpus of business correspondence, which took place in English as a foreign language among technicians from seven different European countries, in order to find individual features in terms of grammar, word order and vocabulary and thus contribute to establish the characteristics of different European varieties of English.

**Keywords**

EFL; ESL; European English; Nativisation process; Varieties of English

**Resumo**

Maggie Burns (6-7) afirma que, como resultado do crescente uso do inglês europeu por falantes não nativos, esta língua está a divergir cada vez mais da variedade britânica. Por ser a língua estrangeira mais falada em instituições da União Europeia e em situação de negócios, os europeus continentais sentem necessidade de acomodar a variedade britânica para transmitir o sentido integral da sua própria língua. Como consequência, os europeus estão a comunicar em cada vez mais variedades de inglês europeu.

Deste modo, tendo como base um corpus de correspondência comercial em inglês língua estrangeira, mantida entre técnicos de sete países europeus diferentes, este trabalho tem, como objetivo, encontrar aspetos individuais em termos de gramática, vocabulário e ordem sintática, contribuindo para o estudo das características das diferentes variedades de inglês europeu.

**Palavras-chave**

ILE; ISL; Inglês europeu; Processo de nativização; Variedades de Inglês