Studying children and adolescents in World Englishes: Rethinking paradigms and approaches

Full-day workshop at ISLE 6

Convenors: Thorsten Brato (University of Regensburg), Sarah Buschfeld (TU Dortmund), Mirjam Schmalz (University of Zurich)

Outline

Over the last two decades, the focus in World Englishes has gradually shifted away from classifying and describing linguistic entities as static and clearly delimitable varieties (like Outer or Expanding Circle Englishes) to the evolution and development of these varieties. In addition, recent research has called for a joint and more flexible treatment of variety types (e.g. native, second, and learner Englishes) and the integration of linguistic subdisciplines. In this respect, the strict separation of World Englishes and the field of (Second) Language Acquisition research constitutes one of several paradigm gaps (cf. Buschfeld forthcomingb). This was first theorised by Sridhar & Sridhar (1986) and has recently been explored empirically in several studies (cf. e.g. the contributions to Mukherjee & Hundt 2011, Laporte 2012, or the study by Percillier 2016). However, even though much more flexible in their approach, none of these studies takes into account the language of children and adolescents. The first study that does is Buschfeld (forthcominga), who investigates the acquisition of a postcolonial, originally L2 variety (Singapore English) as a first language. She concludes that only an integrative approach to language acquisition and World Englishes research allows a full understanding of these new developments, viz. L1 acquisition of former L2 varieties by a new generation of speakers. What is more, current models of the evolution of World Englishes do not explicitly address children and young adolescents despite the pivotal role they play in the diffusion of innovative linguistic variants in language and dialect contact situations (e.g. Trudgill 1986; Kerswill & Williams 2000).

A further paradigm gap may be identified between World Englishes and (variationist) sociolinguistics (Sharma 2017). Most work in the latter area has focussed on western, mainly monolingual societies, in which children acquire the sociolinguistic norms of their community usually from their parents, before peer influence takes over and teenagers dissociate themselves from their elders. That this assumption may not necessarily be true for children growing up in a different context has been shown by several studies within a British-Asian context (cf. e.g. Sharma 2011, 2017; Alam & Stuart-Smith 2011). Studies of children and teenagers informed by sociolinguistics and World Englishes are still rare. One major study was conducted by Lacoste (2012), who researched primary school children’s speech in rural Jamaica and a project by Meer aims to describe accent variation and attitudes to Standard English in Trinidadian Secondary Schools (cf. Meer et al. 2019). A strong focus on language attitudes is also present in a current study by Schmalz (2019) in which she investigates the interplay of children’s language perceptions and education in St. Kitts. She finds that the children of her study exhibit a strong preference for the exonormative variety of Southern British English, which in turn might have implications for the education system present on the island. Ongoing work by Brato et al. (in progress) on primary school children in Yaoundé describes the rapid decline in the knowledge and use of the home languages in favour of English and French and compares their speech to that of their parents. These and other studies may open up new research avenues that allow us to question what is considered ‘common knowledge’ in both language acquisition and sociolinguistics and may help understand how current changes in World Englishes proceed and allow us to model future developments.
Call for papers

This workshop mainly aims to bring together researchers working on the language of children and adolescents within a World Englishes paradigm, but we also encourage scholars researching these groups in migrant communities in L1 contexts (such as Canada or Australia) to contribute. The range of topics may include, but is not limited to the following areas:

- first and second language acquisition
- sociolinguistic variation and awareness
- language use and choice
- family language policies (cf. King et al. 2008)
- methodologies of eliciting speech and writing from children and adolescents
- child-directed speech
- language attitudes and perception
- modelling children’s and adolescents’ language in World Englishes
- the role of child language acquisition in processes of language change

In line with the general conference pattern, papers in this workshop will be allotted 20 minutes for presentation followed by a 10-minute discussion. The workshop will be rounded off by a summary from a (more) theoretical perspective by Paul Kerswill and a general discussion.

We plan the publication of selected papers in an edited volume or journal special issue following the successful completion of the workshop.

Please submit your abstract of 300-500 words (excluding references) by email to thorsten.brato@ur.de by 31 December 2019. Notification of acceptance will be sent out by 31 January 2020.

References


Brato, Thorsten, Samuel Atechi & Serges Essossomo. in progress. “The sociolinguistics of a class of primary school children in Yaoundé: Background, variation and change”.


