

L3 and the new inner circle

Paul Emmerson suggests an alternative to Kachru's 'three circles'.



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When people with different L1s get together and talk in English, who do you think are the world's most mutually intelligible speakers? Possible candidates might include:

- non-native professionals such as business people, lawyers, doctors, academics, journalists, etc. with a high level of English;
- non-native teachers of English;
- language students who have a high grade in a Cambridge ESOL/Toefl/IELTS exam;
- many of the Eastern Europeans, Latin Americans and East Asians who staff London's cafés and restaurants (and rent multiple-occupancy flats in the block where I live).

What can we say about these people's pronunciation, lexis, grammar and discourse?

In terms of pronunciation it is now routine to observe that none of them speak RP (Received Pronunciation) or GA (General American), and yet it is surprisingly non-routine to observe that what they speak is closely related to it. We also have to note that RP/GA is easier for a non-native speaker to understand than working-class London English or broad Texan.

Kachru, in another context, defined three 'circles' of countries where English is spoken:

- *inner circle*: UK, USA, Australia, etc.;
- *outer circle*: India, Nigeria, Singapore (where English is an official language alongside others); and
- *expanding circle*: countries where English is learned as a second language (most others).

But it is clear from the list in the first paragraph that country of origin is not a key factor for an individual's ability to communicate effectively in an international context. I am going to propose three new circles. But first, some definitions:

- '*RP/GA Minus*' is a new term I will use in this article and is defined as follows:

Any one individual's pronunciation where:

- words are spoken approximately as they are written in phonemic script in ELT dictionaries (RP or GA), but there is a slight accent according to country of origin;
- there is use of tone units to create chunks of meaning and nuclear stress to make key words prominent (like native speakers do, although not necessarily as fully);
- *but* there is *not* much use of assimilation/elision/weak forms (unlike native speakers).
- '*High-Frequency Lexis Plus*' is a new term I will use in this article and is defined as any one individual's spoken lexis where:
 - the speaker uses fluently the 3000 or so most common words in English;

- the speaker also uses high-frequency chunks of language such as common collocations (in topic vocabulary) and fixed/semi-fixed expressions (in functional language);
- *plus* the speaker uses extra low-frequency words (according to interests/occupation) that are easily explainable, or clear from the context, or understood by other interlocutors;
- *but* there is very little colloquial speech such as idioms, word plays, catchphrases from popular culture etc. and only the commonest phrasal verbs

I suggest that fully intelligible international English (which I will call 'L3') = '*RP/GA Minus*' *with* '*High-Frequency Lexis Plus*'.



I would now like to identify several categories of English speakers. By the end of the list I will have included nearly all speakers of English in the world, except beginners.

1. Speakers of L3 from 'expanding circle' countries: individuals who through a combination of study, aptitude and life experience have an advanced level of English—perhaps a business person with many international contacts, or someone who has lived in London or New York for some time and is a good language learner.
2. Speakers of L3 from 'inner circle' or 'outer circle' countries: individuals without a strong accent who are sensitive at a personal, intuitive level to the problems of non-native speakers—perhaps a native-speaker teacher of English, or a homestay family in Brighton or Seattle who take in

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students from their local language school, or an educated business person from Singapore, or a doctor from Pakistan.

3. Speakers from 'expanding circle' countries with a reasonable level of English: individuals who through a combination of study, aptitude and life experience have an approximately intermediate/upper intermediate level of English.
4. Speakers from 'inner circle' or 'outer circle' countries without a strong accent:

educated Brits or Americans or Indians who don't have a strong regional/class accent, but who do use assimilation/elision/weak forms and do make extensive use of low-frequency lexis.

5. Speakers from 'expanding circle' countries with a basic level of English:
individuals who through a combination of study, aptitude and life experience have an approximately pre-intermediate level of English.
6. Speakers from 'inner circle' or 'outer circle' countries who cannot speak (or code-switch into) L3:
someone speaking working-class London English, or broad Texan, or West Indian patois, or Singlish (Singapore English).

My three circles of intelligibility are now:

- a new inner circle of individuals speaking *fully intelligible* international English. This group includes everyone in categories 1 and 2 above. Between two speakers of this group, no effort/repair is required for mutual understanding;
- a new middle circle of individuals speaking *reasonably intelligible* international English. This group includes everyone in categories 3 and 4 above. Between two speakers of this group, some effort/repair is required for mutual understanding;
- a new outer circle of individuals speaking *partially intelligible* international English. This group includes everyone in categories 5 and 6 above. Between two speakers of this group, a good deal of effort/repair is required for mutual understanding.



Figure 1: Mutual intelligibility in international English

Again, the fully intelligible international English (L3) spoken by members of the inner circle (the kind of people listed at the start of this article) is:

'RP/GA Minus' with 'High-Frequency Lexis Plus'

What about grammar? Let's imagine a speaker who speaks L3 as defined above but has minimal grammar. They have correct word order, but little variety of verb forms, only one form of the conditional, no plural 's' on many nouns, most yes/no questions formed by using a statement followed by 'right?', etc. In fact I met someone who spoke like this a few years ago—he was born in New York but his family came from Puerto Rico. In terms of accent, he was able to code-switch his Spanglish to something close to GA. And without

question, his English was fully intelligible and his communicative competence was excellent. What is also true, however, is that his speech appeared 'non-educated'. This did not seem to be a problem for him personally, but would be for many learners. This gives a clue as to why people ask for and study grammar. We want to get it right so that we can be seen to be getting it right. We don't want to be seen as speakers of pidgin.

Another reason for the importance of grammar is that it does have a direct relation to fluency. If we decide personally that a non-inflected pidgin is good enough for us, that's fine—once we've acquired the base form of a new word it will be rapidly incorporated into the stream of speech. But if we decide that we want to use at least some grammar, then, as we speak, we constantly have to pause while we work out what the form of the next word/s should be. We feel this

How much and what features of grammar appear in any one individual's L3 depends on the person concerned'

strongly when we learn a new language—the frustration of knowing the words but not being able to get them out because of our lack of grammar and syntax. The more we can interiorize and routinize choices of form, the less we have to pause and think, and the more fluent our speech will be. So we study grammar.

A final reason for wanting to learn grammar is the human mind's pleasure in making patterns and looking for completeness. Why read the last few chapters of a book or stay to the end of a film? Why place another piece in a jigsaw or solve another clue in a crossword puzzle? Why work through a foreign language grammar syllabus and try to get the exercises right? The reasons are similar: we do it for the satisfaction of getting closure, of seeing how the pieces fit together to make a complex whole. We want the story to finally make sense.

So grammar is not essential for L3. But it nearly always appears in L3 because speakers want to use it. How much and what features of grammar appear in any one individual's L3 depends on the person concerned—how much they have acquired through study and exposure. And, far more than for pronunciation and lexis, it is a matter of choice how complex they want their grammar to be (as other people will usually understand them fully with simpler grammar). So perhaps we can call this component of L3 'Personally Appropriate Grammar' and put it in brackets to show it is not essential:

L3 = 'RP/GA Minus' with 'High-Frequency Lexis Plus' (with 'Personally Appropriate Grammar')

Finally, discourse: in L3 the use of lexis is transparent and needs little social/cultural context to be understood. As compared to native-speaker talk, the intended meaning of an utterance is more closely related to its propositional content, and layers of meaning are rare. What you see is what you get.

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