

Tracing structural nativization in New Englishes

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The last few decades have seen new varieties of English emerging in post-colonial societies around the globe (Schneider 2003) — a challenge as yet unanswered by descriptive sociolinguistics. These varieties are characterized by distinctive features on the levels of pronunciation, lexis, and also syntax, but given that structural nativization proceeds inconspicuously and affects only select linguistic phenomena in any given region, such innovations are difficult to detect, although an observation of the process in its early stages would be of great interest to variation studies and theories of language contact and change.

The research reported in this paper employs a corpus-based approach to unearth such emerging innovations. I investigate recently-released electronic corpora of spoken and written texts (of about one million word tokens from each region) from Great Britain, Singapore, India, the Philippines, Kenya, and Tanzania, compiled as parts of the “International Corpus of English” (ICE) project (see www.ucl.ac.uk:80/english-usage/ice/index.html). Earlier documentation suggests that structural innovations have tended to occur at the boundary between grammar and lexis, so I have chosen a feature for investigation which promises to satisfy this condition, viz. uses of particle verbs. Some relevant properties of this lexical class as well as the research background and the methodological problems involved are briefly surveyed.

The analysis proper looks into three areas of potential innovation: frequency of occurrence (of select forms in the varieties under investigation), syntactic patterns of use (e.g. placement of the particle before or after NP complements), and semantic preferences (in the case of polysemic verbs). Each of these broader questions is operationalized in terms of specific corpus-based observations and analyses to test for possible differences in a word’s behavior from one variety to another. In each case, 20 different particle verbs, randomly selected from a phrasal verb dictionary, are examined, and their behavior is compared qualitatively and quantitatively across the regions represented in the corpus. Not surprisingly, some of the tests yield no results of interest, i.e. the respective phrasal verbs behave identically everywhere. Other results are suggestive of possible differences but ultimately inconclusive because of insufficient token numbers (for example, *read through* seems to behave like a prepositional verb, not a phrasal verb, in East African English, but the number of attestations is small.). Some tests, finally, document distinctive features of newly-emerging varieties — preferences for specific forms, uses and meanings of a given particle verb in only some of the national varieties of English under scrutiny. To cite a few examples: in general, phrasal verbs are used very frequently in Singapore but comparatively rarely in India and East Africa; Kenyans use *pick sb.* rather than *pick sb. up*; Singaporeans prefer *to finish up/off sth.* over *to finish sth.*; and in East Africa *to put sth. up* mostly means ‘to establish a business’.

Schneider, Edgar W. 2003. The dynamics of New Englishes: From identity construction to dialect birth. *Language* 79:2, 233-281.