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**English in Europe: rethinking international English**

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# English in Europe

## Rethinking International English

Professor Andrew Linn questions the validity of a commonly-used model for global English, suggesting that a more subtle and complex picture is emerging that requires new analytical approaches.

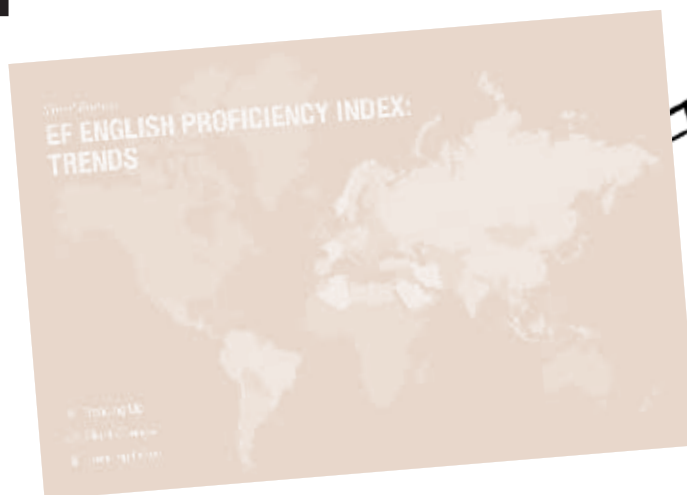
### The Circles Of English

Professor Jane Setter's article in the September 2013 issue of *emagazine* ('World Englishes, English as Lingua Franca, Global English... What's the Difference?') includes a well-known diagram showing the three Circles of English. Braj Kachru, one of the pioneering scholars of World Englishes, developed this model three decades ago to show that, while English is used across the globe, its role varies, depending on the political and historical context of the country in question. In Kachru's model there are so-called **Inner Circle** countries, countries like the UK, the USA and Australia, sometimes described as 'norm providing' countries, where English has a long history as the first or only language for the majority of the population. Then there are **Outer Circle** countries, where English was not historically a mother tongue, but where, usually due to a colonial past as in India and some countries of Africa, English has spread and gained a significant status. Finally, **Expanding Circle** countries are those where English is widely used and taught as a foreign language but has no

official status, as in much of Europe. This model has helped linguists rethink the role of English worldwide and undermined the ideology of English as uniquely the property of its native speakers, but it has two key limitations. Firstly, it suggests a hierarchy where the position of English gets weaker as we move out from the inner circle, and secondly it suggests that how people use English depends primarily on their nationality.

### Who Is The Best At English?

Let us take the first point first, that English has a weaker position in those countries where it does not have official status, that it is more marginal in the expanding circle than it is in the language's 'heartlands'. This seems like a reasonable assumption to make, but the evidence suggests that things aren't so clear cut. Education First, the largest private global provider of educational services, has for the past few years been producing an English Proficiency Index (EPI), an international ranking of countries by English language skills. The most recent version is from 2014 and is based on the performance of 750,000 adults taking the Education First English tests worldwide. Countries are then divided into five categories ranging from 'Very High Proficiency' down to 'Very Low Proficiency'. In 2014 the countries in the top category were Denmark, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Poland and Austria, in that order. While a textbook 'Outer Circle' country like India languishes in the 'Moderate Proficiency' category, the gold medal position is firmly dominated by Northern Europe and specifically the Nordic countries.



## English No Longer A Foreign Language In Northern Europe

Reasons for this dominance are not hard to find. The Nordic languages are small in terms of numbers of native speakers. The Nordic language councils promote the mutual intelligibility of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish to make a political point about a common Scandinavian language with 20 million speakers (see the Use Scandinavian



Facebook page! – <https://www.facebook.com/BrukSkandinavisk>), but the fact remains that knowing an international language is a necessity in a global context, rather like possessing a passport. English is taught in schools from Year 1 and it can be seen and heard everywhere, in popular and serious publications and in TV shows and films, which are subtitled rather than dubbed. Whether professionally or for leisure activities, the citizens of the Nordic countries command a very high level of competence in English and encounter the

language in the majority of situations. English can no longer be characterised as a 'foreign' language. For most people English is more like a second than a foreign language. Recent language legislation in the Nordic countries has focused on the question of English alongside the native languages, so we can argue that English has now even gained official status. The northern rim of Europe now looks much more like part of the Outer Circle, but, according to the traditional definitions, this is classic Expanding Circle territory. This tells us that language doesn't stand still, and one of the reasons why we find English so endlessly fascinating is that both the form of the language and its socio-political context are always changing so that established theories and models no longer provide an adequate explanation.

## Too Much English?

So, on the face of it, the Nordic countries are winners in the international English game. Doing English is a key skill for global competitiveness, and Nordic people are doing it better than pretty much anyone else. But, to quote Marcellus in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, 'something is rotten in the State of Denmark'! As early as half a century ago, the impact of all this English on the native languages was causing concern. In 1972, the year when Norway voted not to join the European Community, the head of the language council was already writing with alarm about the 'flood of loans from English-American'. Over the following decades there were various campaigns to discourage excessive use of English and of English loanwords until a government-level response to the threat of English really took off around the turn of the millennium. The over-riding concern wasn't all those loanwords, however. After all, think how many words English has borrowed from other languages, and it certainly hasn't died out as a result! The real worry was something called **domain loss**. Many commentators reported that key 'domains' of language use, and crucially these tended to be economically important ones, such as scientific writing, teaching in university and business communication, were being handed over to English. How would a Swedish vet talk to a Swedish farmer about their sick animals if all his or her teaching and reading had been via the medium of English? This led to a new policy of parallel language use, promoting the use of the languages **in parallel**. The idea was that people shouldn't just default to English but should rather aim to use the languages

side by side in a more conscious way. A more politically active version, promoted by the Norwegian business community, was

### Use Norwegian when you can, and English when you have to!

Quite a lot of the heat has gone out of the argument now that the Nordic languages are on the cusp of dying out under pressure from increasing and excessive use of English, but the point is this: English across the world is not a neutral issue. It is in fact highly political, and a neat model which wraps it up in three circles is one which is just too neat to do justice to the messy reality of English in a global context.

## English In A Time Of 'Super-diversity'

And this brings us to our second point. According to the EPI, proficiency in English across Europe is very variable. Spain, Portugal, Italy and France, along with, for example, Japan and Taiwan fall into the 'moderate proficiency' category. Consequently, it is problematic to talk about the 'expanding circle' countries as if they were all the same. A recent Europe-wide project, *English in Europe: Opportunity or Threat?*, based at the University of Sheffield, has revealed that attitudes towards and use of English vary not only from country to country but also from context to context. In South-East Europe, for example, there is in general less widespread and less advanced knowledge of English than in the North-West of the continent, but there is also a less critical attitude towards English-Medium Instruction in schools and universities, for example Croatian engineering students studying in English. However, a range of research projects reported as part of the English in Europe network indicate that the reality is in fact much more fine-grained even than that. English is not a uniform thing. To talk about 'English versus French' or 'English in Sweden' as if English is a uniform 'thing', doesn't reflect day-to-

day reality for many European citizens who function in what have been called **transient multilingual communities** and for whom every communication situation is different. English forms part of their language repertoire, so they might choose bits of English or they might choose bits of other languages, depending on their immediate communication needs. A lot of the time it's not a case of choosing either English or language X, but rather a mixture, and it's certainly not a case of choosing something associated with Britain or the USA. English in Europe, in an age characterised by super-diversity, is a tool, a valuable tool of course, but just one of many tools to allow people to talk their way through their multinational, multilingual, mobile lives.

### Some Interesting Web Places

English in Europe: Opportunity or Threat? <http://www.englishineurope.group.shef.ac.uk/>

The English Proficiency Index – <http://www.ef.co.uk/eipi/>

Super-diversity – <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4266102.stm>

Endangered languages – <http://www.endangeredlanguages.com/>

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### @ emag web archive

- World Englishes, *emagazine* 61 September 2013
- A Brief History of Australian English, *emagazine* 55 February 2012
- Linguicide – Languages Under Threat, *emagazine* 20 April 2003

