

# English as a ‘global design’?

Decolonising English as ‘local designs’

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## Abstract

English has spread from the traditional Anglophone (i.e., ‘native’-English) to the post-colonial world, and further to globalised networks. Nevertheless, the colonial legacy of linking English to the monolingualist standards of a few national varieties in the West continues to thrive even in regions that have never been colonised by Anglophone powers. This paper locates English in currently ubiquitous multilingual settings, critiques colonial approaches to English as if it were a universal Western ‘product’, and proposes decolonising English through mobile multilinguals’ daily communicative practices. In accordance with English as a lingua franca (ELF) and translanguaging empirical findings, English is reimagined as bridging linguistic and cultural complexity in each local interaction where participants appropriate their familiar models of English as well as other communicative resources. An example from an online platform illustrates how meaning is not reducible to the single named language of English and how English is embedded in wider meaning-making affordances in transcultural encounters. The paper encourages English-speaking multilinguals to exercise more agency to embody their full communicative capacity as appropriate to the situation, thus defying the symbolic power of colonial ideologies.

## Introduction

English serves as today’s most prominent lingua franca, permeating a variety of multilingual settings. A lingua franca is, by definition, learnt and

used by speakers from different linguistic backgrounds and subject to influences from other languages. Indeed, historical *lingua francas*, such as Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Portuguese, are all characterised by linguistic hybridity (Ostler, 2006). While modern English itself resulted from the contact of different languages, including French, Greek, and Latin, what we experience today seems to be post-modern or *ad hoc* hybridity in the guise of English. In an era characterised by unprecedented mobility, most English speakers interact with each other through and across cartographical boundaries while having other languages at their disposal.

English-speaking multilinguals will continue to appropriate English for a range of specific interactions on a global scale. Then, it is questionable whether we could continue to research their use of English solely from the perspective of one named language and in association with particular geographical areas. The recent *trans turn* in applied linguistics, especially *translanguaging*, has begun to question the very notion of named languages and the links between languages and nations (Li, 2018). Similarly, *transculturality*, or the fluid movement of cultural practices across local, national, and global scales, has been well attested as a consequence of the expanding reach of social networks (e.g., Pennycook, 2007). English will keep evolving far beyond the Anglophone (i.e., 'native'-English) world and involving an increasing number of people from geographical areas where English is traditionally regarded as a foreign language.

Against this backdrop, the present paper problematises the colonial legacy of nationalism, monolingualism, and Western-centrism in English ideologies. These colonial views have led to the systematised construct of English as a globally commodifiable language. The paper also examines the lingering influence of the colonial ideologies on a *pluri-centrist* framework for Englishes in the world. It then suggests that decolonising English will

be made possible by foregrounding English users' full meaning-making repertoires and their agentic interactional practices. To this effect, it offers a new interpretation of the well-documented three loci of language, reimagining English as what bridges mobile multilinguals' linguistic and cultural realities. An example from everyday digital communication illustrates how English is inevitably linked with situated meaning-making affordances in an emerging transcultural space. All in all, multilinguals are invited to decolonise English through their daily communicative actions, unleashing their real-world capability from ideological constraints.

### **English-related colonial ideologies**

History witnesses that European colonisation stifled local epistemologies and cultural practices in the cause of civilisation and modernisation. Even in regions that have never been directly colonised, Eurocentric evolutionary and homogenising conceptions, or what may be called colonial ideologies, continue to control subjectivity and knowledge (Mignolo, 2021). Language is no exception. A nationally named language or language variety is taught at school as per the colonial ideology of nationalism (Anderson, 2016). This ideology, when coupled with another ideology of standard language, posits that each nation-state should have its own 'consummate' language, which in fact derives from the linguistic practices of the upper-middle class for the sake of domestic political and institutional expediency (Milroy & Milroy, 2017). The authorisation of a certain dialect as standard is, thus, an ideologically laden task, not a matter of linguistic quality. As multilingualism is largely the norm within and across nations, languages other than the national standard are minoritised and occasionally lost historically. Among the public, languages are

associated with nations by default. Moreover, language-related research is frequently fraught with methodological nationalism, dividing its agenda, participants, and implications into specified nations and thereby failing to capture the immanent dynamics of globalisation (Schneider, 2019).

Irrespective of its widespread use, English is tied to Western countries or equated with a few national standard varieties, especially in the UK and US. The colonial ideology of standard English promotes this first-language (L1) English as a desirable foreign language and accentuates it as independent of other languages (Morán-Panero & Baker, 2025 forthcoming). While the actual purpose of learning English is “to become bilingual and multilingual, rather than to replace the learner’s L1 to become another monolingual” (Li, 2018, p. 16), the colonial ideology of monolingualism propagates English-monolingual thinking and performance as ‘natural’ and ‘best’ to promote the Anglophone brand (Seidlhofer, 2018). Obviously, only Anglophones can choose to be monolingual English speakers. Many second language acquisition studies seem to have corroborated, rather than challenged, this monolingualist and Anglophone-oriented worldview by legitimising English use in the West. Table 1 below summarises the key characteristics of English-related colonial ideologies.

**Table 1**  
**English-related colonial ideologies**

<i>Ideologies</i>	<i>Descriptions</i>
Nationalism	The nation-state is believed to be the default unit of observation and analysis.
Standard English ideology	Standard Englishes in the UK and US are believed to be the global standard.
Monolingualism	Both monolinguals and multilinguals are believed to function with one language at a time.

## English as a global design

Undergirded by those colonial ideologies, English in the West is idealised as a systematic object in English language teaching (ELT) and commodified globally, together with teaching methods, materials, and assessment techniques (Holliday, 2018). Large-scale, high-stakes standardised English language tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), capitalise on non-Anglophones (i.e., 'non-native' English speakers). They wield the power to make the global standardness of foreign English varieties, largely 'American' (US) and British, an established 'reality'. In Mignolo's (2021) term, this type of English constitutes a 'global design', that is, the exportation of a Western product to the rest of the world as if it were unmarked and universal. In the process, the local multilingual ontologies in which most of us find English today are marginalised or made into oblivion.

It should be noted that English as a global design, or commonly termed 'standard English in ELT', is a further abstracted version of those foreign varieties. While standard English within world superpowers is uncritically equated with the global default, any national standard language needs to change over generations and tends to be used in a variable manner even within the same generation and country. Consequently, standard English in ELT is sanitised from the dynamic exploitation of the language in real-world domains, based on the intuitions of writers of internationally marketed materials (Leung, 2005). It differs from the English they actually use for themselves. These writers are customarily white and middle-class Anglophones from the West, and mostly from the US and UK (Kiczkowiak, 2022). In short, English as a global design is virtually no one's language, but

only those belonging to specific social groups are entitled to construct what it should be like.

## Englishes in the world

World Englishes (WE) studies have embarked on addressing the power imbalances between Anglophones and non-Anglophones for over half a century. They take an evolutionary and heterogeneous approach to the spread of English to 'new' countries and regions. Thanks to WE research, the argument is now well known that the ownership of English is equally shared by all its speakers. Scholars in the WE field counter-argue the monolithic conception of English by advocating "the importance of recognising the pluricentricity of English and the equal treatment given to all varieties of English and its speakers" (Marlina, 2014, p. 6).

Nonetheless, it does not seem that a variationist comparative framework in the WE field entirely dismantles dominant monolingualist and nationalist ideologies of English. It concentrates on the named language of English in its investigation of targeted areas where indigenous languages are vital sources of interaction, access to English is unequal, and local 'elites' familiarise themselves with Anglophone models of English. It also focuses on territorial categories, often at the national level, "using iconic badges like Indian English, Nigerian English, Malaysian English, etc." (Bhatt, 2023, p. 63) and obscuring a rich linguistic ecology within and across geographical units. Arguably, by advocating an egalitarian view as a way of validating 'new' English speakers, this body of work seems to maintain Anglophones as a tacit point of reference and uphold the very systems it is resisting (i.e., colonial ideologies of nationalism and monolingualism or a focus on traditionally constructed notions of English). Then, in order to thoroughly

decolonise English, the possibility of alternative systems needs investigating, or to borrow Santos's (2007) words, we need to go "beyond abyssal thinking" (p. 45).

### **Decoloniality in global English use**

Having been rooted in a South American political and philosophical discourse, decolonial studies aim to make explicit the oppressive legacy of colonial ideologies and commit to a social justice agenda (Mignolo, 2021). Decolonial scholars criticise a long-standing, taken-for-granted epistemological and institutional structure that sustains unequal power, knowledge, and material resources under the name of development and advancement. A decolonial turn has been present for decades in many disciplines, all the more so because colonial ideologies circulate beyond former colonies. Recently, it has begun to be featured in applied linguistics (Jordão, 2024).

While no language is colonial by itself, what are referred to as English-related colonial ideologies in this paper is tantamount to totalising accounts of English in language education and in society, more broadly. Decoloniality in applied linguistics seeks to question the symbolic power of monolingual Anglophones in the West, and in particular, the UK and US (Jordão, 2024). Notably, an applied linguistics field of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has captured the multilingual nature of interactions among English users in the world since its beginning around the millennium (Jenkins et al., 2018). It reveals that intelligibility results not from adherence to the Anglophone standard (however it may be defined), but from dynamic adaptability and hybridity in language use. Likewise, another applied linguistics field of translanguaging sees language as a social practice, with speakers drawing

on their unitary repertoires that are an aggregation of multilingual resources and processes (García & Otheguy, 2020). It demonstrates that multilinguals transcend the boundaries of named languages (i.e., translingual) as well as the boundaries of languages and other modalities (i.e., transmodal) to create synergic meaning for effective communication. Conversely, it would be unrealistic and unreasonable to require them to keep 'non-English' resources held in abeyance during meaning-making and interpretation. There appears to be no widely agreed-upon definition of the boundary between English and non-English resources at any linguistic level (e.g., phonological, lexical, grammatical, pragmatic). After all, linguistic boundaries are ideologically envisaged, frequently at the national scale.

Foregrounding inherent multilingual influences as well as translingual and transmodal practices among English users, ELF and translanguaging empirical research opens a way to decolonise the descriptions and conceptualisations of English. This research takes the direction of empowering mobile multilingual English users rather than monolingual counterparts from a few geographical and political dominions. Arguably, the exploitation of communicative resources in a flexible, situationally appropriate manner is becoming normal practice for English speakers – at least for the great majority of them who take advantage of English resources across the globe. These speakers adapt and transform their familiar (standard) models of English in their immediate multilingual settings for their own purposes. They need to resist monolingualist identities to be fully communicative through English as multilinguals. They need to dissociate English from the West in order to express themselves and acknowledge global linguistic and cultural flows.

## English as local designs

Kumaravadivelu (2016) ponders whether the 'subaltern' or the non-Anglophone community 'can act'. It is estimated that there will be more than four billion English speakers by 2050 (Rose & Galloway, 2019), making the ratio of non-Anglophones roughly seven out of eight. This vast majority will use English as an additional language and have at least one other language than English. The fate of whether the subaltern can act probably depends on their awareness and appropriation of rich multilingual opportunities surrounding English.

As summarised in Table 2 below, applied linguists have proposed the three different dimensions of language: ideological, interactional, and cognitive (Harris, 1997; Risager, 2006; Mauranen, 2012). By reinterpreting this conception of language to fit the purpose of this paper, English could be seen as a 'global design' or a nationalist and monolingualist entity, only at the ideological locus of language. It would also be seen as a 'local design' in each specific instance of communication at the cognitive and interactional levels or "the two 'natural' loci of language" (Risager, 2006, p. 74). English users are increasingly networked both online and offline, processing a range of individually available communicative resources and participating in designing English in situ. Their multilingual and multimodal resources contribute to this process even when their final utterances look entirely English (Cogo, 2021). In so doing, they may transform their understanding of the named language of English in defiance of the ideologically imagined global design and in accordance with empirically observed locally contingent multilingual influences and translingual, transmodal practices as outlined in the previous section.

**Table 2**  
**Loci of language vis-à-vis English as global and local designs**

<i>Loci</i>		<i>Descriptions</i>	
Ideological		A nationally named, monolingual language	<b>English as a global design</b>
Real-world	Interactional	Observable various multilingual influences and translingual, transmodal practices	<b>English as local designs</b>
	Cognitive	Each participant's full communicative resources and processes	

Unpredictability in interactions among English users, or better put, destabilisation in categorical thinking, is well captured by complexity theory, according to which language is not a static, independent thing, but an aggregate and constantly adaptive system with blurred boundaries (Larsen-Freeman, 2018). As multiple named languages are involved in cognitive and interactional processes to varying degrees and in varying manners according to the situation, what emerges from each interaction is not foreseeable but distinctive. As Gleick (2008) famously states on complexity theory, “the act of playing the game has a way of changing the rules” (p. 24). In the flow of social networks, each interaction “has a way of changing” English in a locally adaptable manner to better express interactants’ linguistic identities and cultural practices. With English embedded in wider meaning-making possibilities, or nested in other adaptive systems, its speakers will create a transient space for each instance of communication (Canagarajah, 2023). This emergent space may have a chance to ‘talk back’ to the ideological assumptions of English as an encapsulated and universal Western ‘product’. In brief, decolonising English may be characterised as exploring and exercising the miscellaneous

manifestations of English dynamically and locally in transcultural milieux.

### **English as local designs in practice**

Even when communication appears to be through English, interactants may develop translingual and transmodal practices for understanding the world and one another, thereby embodying the potential to decolonise English as a 'local design'. Each communicative instance is unique, with different groupings bringing different linguistic and cultural resources. Therefore, no example would be generalisable. Even so, the analysis of a real-world example will help illustrate the point. The author's ongoing study targets how language and identity come together in digital interaction among university students. In the example below (Extract 1), Mia in Sapporo, Japan has just become acquainted with Max in Paris, France, thanks to the social networking site Instagram. Mia often sings Korean songs, and Max has many Asian colleagues at his institution, including Japanese and Korean. They are exchanging private messages on this platform.

Max refers to transnational groupings, specifically university year and academic discipline (Line 01). Both participants happen to be Year 3 students in a business and economics programme at their respective institutions. He brings up pan-Asian cultural practices of showing respect and intimacy to older people by adding honorific terms to their names (Line 01). Translingual and transmodal features are already salient in his first turn. Specifically, Max's use of parentheses seems effective to introduce the Japanese examples of "san" and "sempai" (Line 01). His three-dotted line shows that there are other examples, and this symbol is familiar in many languages. Similarly, Mia's succinct, emphatic remark creates a casual

**Extract 1****A private message exchange on Instagram**

01 *Max*: Same I'm in my 3rd year of business school  
I have a question maybe it's a stereotype but do  
you still have respectful mark like (-san,  
-sempai..) or it isn't like that anymore?

02 *Mia*: Yes, for older people!

03 *Max*: Ohhh that's really cool!  
What's your hobbies?  
Do you like music? Sport?

04 *Mia*: I like K-pop!

05 *Max*: Ohhh cool! I am listening some also  
which group are you listening?

06 *Mia*: Bts, le sserafim, twice, ive  
♥ [Max reacted.]

07 *Max*: I don't know le sserafim  
can u tell me one song to listen?

08 *Mia*: They have new songs!  
It's unforgiven

09 *Max*: Ok I go listen it right now

10 *Max*: I actually like it!  
And I also see that there is a whole album  
"unforgiven"  
I will listen it tomorrow!

(The author's unpublished data)

atmosphere (Line 02), triggering the reciprocal use of another ubiquitous symbol "!" in successive turns (Lines 02–05, 08, 10).

Mia positions herself as a cultural expert of K-pop music (Lines 04, 06, 08). Having originated in South Korea, K-pop synthesises global music genres and becomes globally familiar, with some idol groups involving Japanese members. As an active music listener, Max adapts the verb listen into an 'active' transitive verb (i.e., not 'listen to something' but 'listen something') throughout the extract (Lines 05, 07, 09–10). As a multilingual

English speaker, he probably wanted to use this verb in the same manner as French écouter (a transitive verb) even if this may be seen as a non-standard form from a monolingualist perspective. The reaction ♥ seems to show both his affection for K-pop and his appreciation for Mia's information (Line 06). Together with his colloquial use of language (e.g., "Ohhh" in Lines 03, 05) and the music allegedly being played (Line 05), this globally familiar icon transmodally promotes intimacy with her. Intriguingly, the appellation Le Sserafim (Lines 06–07) comes from the hybridity of English and French resources. It was coined by using the letters of the English phrase 'I'm fearless' in a different order. At the same time, it is translingually reminiscent of French les séraphins (the seraphim) or angelic beings. Max solicits information about Le Sserafim, and then looks up *Unforgiven* and plays it online (Lines 07, 09). His rather excited response is probably embraced by an avant-garde atmosphere of the song (Line 10), whose lyrics move through the linguistic boundaries of English and Korean rhythmically.

In sum, participants design English 'locally' as a lingua franca to bridge their communicative repertoires and exchange cultural knowledge and experiences. They achieve meaning through the synergetic use of global symbols, the transcultural flow of K-pop, and the English espoused with Japanese and French. As such, meaning is not reducible to the single named language of English or the colonial perception of English as a global design. Rather, it may be transcultural and translanguaging identities that facilitate them to navigate their shared space for communication in a ubiquitously connected digital world.

## Discussion and conclusion

English will increasingly become multilingually and multimodally 'infused' as it is used outside of Anglophone settings and by speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. More precisely, monolingualism was only the norm in the colonial framework of thinking, and translingual, transmodal practices may feature English communication, typically in digital spaces. Certainly, no interaction takes place in a social and political vacuum. English-speaking multilinguals would still have to acknowledge the symbolic power of colonial ideologies of nationalism, monolingualism, and standard English. However, in line with ELF and translanguaging studies, the national scale is just among many possible spatial levels to conceptualise language and not necessarily important for interactants who are mobile across political and geographical boundaries. They are processing multilingual and multimodal resources in their repertoires to orchestrate these resources into synergetic meanings even when their interaction may appear English on the surface. After all, language is not amenable to mechanical compartmentalisation and standardisation across different communicative contexts. In this regard, any standard model, including English, should be seen as a sample to be explored and adapted for actual communicative purposes (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021).

In his argument of nebulous cultural flows, Pennycook (2007) expects that: "Caught between fluidity and fixity, then, cultural and linguistic forms are always in a state of flux, always changing, always part of a process of the refashioning of identity" (pp. 4-5). It may be extrapolated that global users of English would face a tension between the two opposing forces of colonial, ideological 'fixity' versus real-world 'fluidity' and decolonial possibilities. Amid ever increasing mobility, they may resist established

colonial precepts when taking English resources to their advantage and refashioning their identity as real to their lives. To this effect, each communicative instance can be an act of deconstructing colonial hegemony by exploiting rich communicative resources irrespective of ideological boundaries. It might not be long before a critical mass recognises the mismatch between what colonial ideologies 'dictate' and what multilinguals are capable of doing in global encounters.

In conclusion, this paper urges mobile multilingual speakers and researchers to redress the asymmetrical symbolic power of nationalist, monolingualist, and Western-centrist ideologies of English by exploiting the liberating possibilities of English as part of transcultural meaning-making resources. This is possible through their everyday communicative practices, including digital interactions. In other words, decolonial opportunities can be everywhere. Perhaps, it is time for more Anglophones to speak out that they do not use idealised standard English in their lives, and that many of them are also mobile multilinguals. In a globally connected multilingual world, both Anglophones and non-Anglophones are likely to be the 'victims' of English-related colonial ideologies. The onus is on us to decolonise English through our awareness and promotion of inherent multilingualism with English.

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