

Special issue: Introduction: More insights into world Englishes at the grassroots

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Abstract

'English at the grassroots' refers to English used by non-elite speakers from lower social strata, with diverse acquisition paths, proficiency levels and usage. These Englishes are often heterogeneous, shaped by informal contexts and professions. English linguistics has long examined English as a pluricentric language, focusing on its use across first language (L1), second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) contexts, often through corpora, which predominantly represent upper-middle-class speakers. However, English is used in socially stratified societies, and sociolinguistic research has explored how language use correlates with lower social classes, especially in L1 varieties and multilingual contexts. Despite the historical focus on elites in L2/FL English acquisition and use – often due to colonial education systems – English has also spread to lower social strata globally. Yet, access to English is said to often correlate with socio-economic status (SES), especially where education is not universally accessible. Nevertheless, SES does not necessarily always predict that one cannot use some form of English for communicative purposes. Non-educational spaces – such as churches, homes, and social networks – play a crucial role in English acquisition and use outside formal education. These 'grassroots' efforts reflect resourcefulness in overcoming systemic barriers, enabling individuals to use English as linguistic capital for mobility, communication, and opportunity, especially in outer circle countries lacking a common indigenous lingua franca.

For several decades, English linguistics has discussed English as a pluricentric language that exists in numerous first (L1), second (L2) and foreign (FL) language world Englishes. Discussions of these varieties as well as of the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) have largely been based on data obtained from what has been labelled 'educated' speakers, who have completed secondary education and often have an academic background. The *International Corpus of English* (ICE: Greenbaum 1996; Universität Zürich 2023), the *Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English* (VOICE: ADHD-CH n.d.) and the *English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings* corpus (ELFA 2008) almost exclusively represent the language of an upper-middle class.

However, uses of English take place in societies characterised by social stratification, that is, by inequalities that exist between individuals and groups as regards the distribution of goods, rewards and life chances. In fact, how social stratification and language use correlate has been extensively researched in English sociolinguistics as well as in pidgin and creole studies: the relationship between language use and lower (particularly working) social classes has long been at the centre of sociolinguistic research on many L1 varieties of English from the early works of Labov (1963, 1966). Social stratification also features in work on multilingual repertoires (Makukule and Brookes 2021), code-switching (McCormick 2002; Mesthrie and Hurst 2013), the work of Rickford (e.g. 2000) and in Blommaert's (2010) 'sociolinguistics of globalization', discussions of translanguaging (Makalela 2015), and linguistic landscapes (Stroud and Mpendukana 2012). Within development studies, research has investigated the socio-economic value of individual languages in multilingual contexts and the potential of English for economic development and social mobility (e.g. Erling et al. 2013).

The focus on elites, which characterises L2 and FL Englishes from within English linguistics, including from within the world Englishes paradigm, may have been motivated by the fact that the use of English as L2 or FL often initially involved societal elites to whom it was formally taught by the British administrators (e.g. Brutt-Griffler 2002; Schneider 2007). Even so, L2 and FL acquisition of English has always taken place outside of the elites, too, and English has spread to and at the lower strata of most societies around the world. Still, there seem to exist social differences in L2 and FL use, as Kachru

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already pointed out in his earliest programmatic publications (1965), and in many societies there seems to exist a correlation between L2/FL use of English, education and socio-economic status (SES).

However, the links are far from clear. While De Houwer (2021) points out that parental SES cannot easily be identified as a factor influencing early childhood bilingualism, formal acquisition of English has frequently been tied to SES in many nations. Particularly where education is (or was) neither free nor compulsory (in the past), individuals from lower social classes and families with lower SES have often received no or limited formal education. As UNICEF (2022) points out for primary education, '[g]lobally, only 3 per cent of children from the richest families were out of school, but 23 per cent from the poorest families were.' The gap between children from poor households and those from rich families is particularly pronounced in West and Central Africa, but also significant in East and Southern Africa, in South Asia and in the Middle East and North Africa. As one way of acquiring English has typically been through formal education, this often results in lower proficiency in English for all those who have not been able to receive quality formal education. Meierkord (2021) documents how this results in different uses of English by individuals from South Africa (where access to education was severely restricted for the Black African and the Coloured population groups during the Apartheid system) and in Uganda (where education has only recently become 'free').

Crucially, like any other generalisation, the correlation between high SES and high levels of educational achievements should be taken with a pinch of salt, especially in outer circle countries. It is possible for learners from a high SES to have low educational achievements, and vice versa, due to factors such as cognitive ability, self-efficacy, motivation, engagement and determination, etc. (cf. Thomson 2018). Indeed, some studies have shown that low SES does not necessarily correlate with low educational achievements. For example, Ochwo (2013) found that pupils in rural schools (where pupils tend to have a low SES) had higher scores in mathematics than those in urban (where pupils tend to have a high SES) schools, while in English both groups performed more or less in the same way, though he admits that this was 'surprising' (p. 107–108), since it was against the popular narrative in the available literature. While such quantitative findings may indeed be isolated or fraught with statistical pitfalls, cases where individuals from low SES have resiliently leveraged their potential to attain higher levels of educational achievements have been documented (cf. Van Breda and Mokoena 2022). For example, the Makerere Endowment Fund X Account (2025), while profiling the legacy of the late Prof. Khiddu Makubuya (a prominent Ugandan lawyer), indicates that he had very humble beginnings (meaning a low SES) as he earned his tuition fees by slashing compounds (a menial job that is normally only performed by low SES individuals in Uganda), but his brilliance made him become the first Ugandan to graduate with a first-class degree in law in 1974 at Makerere University (Uganda), and eventually he obtained a PhD in the same discipline from the University of Edinburgh.

It thus follows that when a combination of cognitive ability, self-efficacy, motivation, engagement, determination and self-evaluation manifests itself favourably among individuals from a low SES, they may resiliently persevere (cf. van Breda and Mokoema 2022) and may thus attain high levels of educational achievements. Specifically, as regards proficiency in English, the above factors are aided by the fact that there exist other loci (both physical and virtual) than formal educational institutions where English can be learnt, namely informal spaces. Isingoma (2021) recounts how social capital (relationships) provides spaces for learning English at the grassroots in Uganda, not least in some churches and homes (see also, e.g. Syvertsen in this volume). Thus, we see some kind of resourcefulness and resilience in overcoming systemic barriers that would exclude individuals from a low SES from accessing or using English, which they need as linguistic capital for global mobility, business and social interactions, as well as for intra-national communication in outer circle countries that lack an indigenous lingua franca, such as Uganda (cf. Isingoma 2021).

In recent publications (Meierkord 2012, 2020; Meierkord and Schneider 2021), the use of English in lower social strata has been referred to as *English at the grassroots*. For the context of this Special Issue, we adopt the definition in Meierkord and Schneider (2021, 8) and take English at the grassroots to be the Englishes used by non-elite speakers, who 'typically come from or find themselves at the lower walks of life; they are not wealthy nor powerful, nor are they members of the upper strata of societies', and, strikingly, they represent a variety of trajectories of English acquisition and proficiency levels. As a result of the latter, and as Meierkord (2020, 331–332) points out, 'the Englishes used at the grassroots are highly heterogeneous as regards their form', at times resembling learners' interlanguage but approximating standard Englishes, but in other cases reflecting heavy restructuring and simplification.¹

Research so far has well documented how English is used and perceived at the grassroots in countries both with and without former British control and in migration and ELF contexts. Individual studies have also investigated the use of English in individual professions, such as domestic workers, airport ground staff, construction workers, taxi drivers, migrant counselling, and in informal work sectors. A concise overview of studies is available in Meierkord and Schneider (2021). Moreover, research has identified both differences and similarities between elite and grassroots sections of societies as regards their use of and attitudes and ideologies towards Englishes (Darvin 2017; Isingoma 2021; Ofori and Albakry 2012; Toefy 2017; see also Mesthrie 2010 in comparison to Meierkord 2012).

This Special Issue of *English Today* aims to contribute further to a better understanding of English at the grassroots. The individual contributions cover a wide range of geographical locations (Bali, India, Japan, Norway, Oman, Spain, Trinidad and Uganda) and users of English (domestic workers, informal business owners, office workers, refugees and tour guides).

Chandrika Balasubramanian describes signage and WhatsApp messages written by multilingual Indian

grassroots users of English in urban India and in Oman, a country with a large migrant labour population from India. Her study shows how phonetic and phonological features that characterise their spoken English influence their orthography as phonemic spelling, which, however, only rarely impedes communication. In addition, her analyses identify grammatical and lexical features that characterise their writing. While many of these features have been attested in Indian English, generally, she finds that there is a high amount of inconsistent and idiosyncratic use of orthography and grammar by users at the grassroots and that frequently several features co-occur within one utterance.

Ryan Durgasingh addresses the problem of English-based creoles not being well integrated into models and theories of world Englishes, as pointed out by Meierkord and Schneider (2021). In a first attempt to remedy this issue, he describes the language situation in Trinidad, where Trinidadian English Creole and Trinidadian English interact and where English serves as what might better be called a second dialect. His paper compares previous findings on morphosyntactic features with data obtained through brief semi-structured interviews conducted with speakers who can be described as 'grassroots'. His findings indicate a regular, if not categorical, use of creole features in the speech of working-class Trinidadians, for whom style-shifting into standard English is often not an option, due to a lack of access and exposure to standard Englishes.

Sandra Issel-Dombert focuses on the role of English in the multilingual repertoires of Filipina domestic workers in the Spanish capital, Madrid. From within the paradigm of critical ethnographic sociolinguistics, she analyses narratives of Filipinas who migrated to Spain between 1971 and 2017. Employed in a low-wage sector but commodified as Anglophone multilingual individuals who easily adapt to new environments, they often regard English as prestigious and valuable for upward social mobility. At the same time, however, English is also seen as a hindrance to the acquisition of Spanish, which, in turn, may lead to discrimination in and exclusion from social participation and at the workplace.

Yoko Kobayashi's literature-based paper investigates the causes behind investments made by non-elite, underprivileged, young Japanese women to achieve upward mobility. Many of these study English in Western English-speaking countries while participating in working holiday programmes as a result of their beliefs in the benefits of developing their English skills and gaining overseas work experience. She shows how these beliefs result from the misconception dominant in Japan's corporate world that jobs requiring foreign language skills, such as interpreting, can be performed by anyone with self-acquired proficiency in English and from related discourses perpetuated by, e.g. colleges and women's magazines that even non-elite young women can achieve career mobility by making these efforts.

Dorica D. Mirembe and Peace Yikiru focus on signage at small-scale informal businesses in Gulu City and in its vicinities. Here, English stands out as the dominant language, used either singly or in combination with Acholi (the indigenous language in the area), while the exclusive use of Acholi is minimal. Addressing a wider readership is the main motivation behind the widespread use of English on the

signage, given its status as an official language in the country and as a lingua franca for many Ugandans. The signage, which has often been produced by grassroots users of English themselves but at times involving professional artists and elite users of Ugandan English, displays both standard and non-standard usage of English.

Examining investment in English by Balinese tour guides, Farah Ramathan and Jill Vaughan reveal three methods used by Balinese tour guides to learn English: formal, informal and a mix of the two, with some of the guides exclusively learning English in informal spaces as grassroots users of English. The authors show that the tour guides involved in the study present different linguistic biographies and learning trajectories, which are influenced by ideology, identity and capital in keeping with Darwin and Norton's (2005) investment model. Their study demonstrates that, while systemic barriers had stood in the way of some of the participants' trajectories of learning English, they resiliently overcame these by leveraging social and cultural capital to learn English in grassroots environments.

Ida Syvertsen looks at how forced migration led Congolese who have now settled in Norway to learn English while in transit in Uganda. The refugees use English as a lingua franca in Norway, as they learn Norwegian, given that many Norwegians can speak English. What is striking is the way the refugees learnt English in Uganda, which Syvertsen argues should be referred to as 'grassroots learning', since the learning is entirely initiated by the refugees themselves. Three main methods of this informal learning have been identified: (i) lingua franca interactions with fellow refugees, where English is the only language that can be shared; (ii) asking questions about English to Ugandans, which Syvertsen characterizes as initiating 'English language awareness in the wild'; (iii) listening to English-speaking radio programmes.

The individual contributions of this Special Issue draw on various paradigms and methods. Besides pursuing quantitative linguistic analyses and thematic analysis, contributors apply ethnographic sociolinguistics, migration linguistics and investment theory. We feel that, besides offering new insights into English at the grassroots, this variety of approaches enriches world Englishes research and wish readers enlightening inspiration to think out of the box.

Note

- 1 The latter cases are discussed in Schneider (2016), who uses the term 'grassroots Englishes' to refer to the Englishes spoken by individuals who acquire these naturally, outside of formal education, typically with an instrumental motivation and in developing countries.

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