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WHAT IS
ENGLISH?

AND WHY
SHOULD WE
CARE?

TIM WILLIAM MACHAN

What is English?

for my mother
Rita Machan Elliott



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ENGLISH?



AND WHY
SHOULD WE
CARE?

TIM WILLIAM MACHAN

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T. W. M.

PART ONE

The Consequences of Definition

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CHAPTER ONE

The River of English

The questions considered in this book, put simply, are: What is English? How do we know? And why should we care? These are partly historical questions, addressing the language's past and future as well as its present; questions whose answers might begin with something as simple as 'English is what I speak', as complex as 'English is a sociological argument that appropriates structural data', or as evasive as 'English is what the grammars and dictionaries say it is'. And they are questions that have become increasingly difficult to answer at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when speakers of English—both those who learned the language from birth and those who acquired it later—together account for perhaps one and one-half billion of the Earth's nearly 7 billion people.

Both the *what* and the *why* of the title run through the following chapters, but for the moment I want to lay aside the *what* in order to concentrate on the *why*, since in doing so I also address the reason for this book's existence. A good place to begin is the ways in which English, and a definition of English, plays a gate-keeping role in some of the most powerful domains in any Anglophone society. Access to employment, eligibility to participate in lucrative international markets, citizenship, social status—these are all affected by knowledge of some agreed-upon version of the language. For a great many English-dominant universities (such as Monash in Australia) regulations stipulate that foreign nationals must demonstrate competence in English to gain admission, and even schools in English-dominant areas (such as the prestigious English boarding school Harrow) explicitly use the language in this gate-keeping fashion. Harrow's web page advises only the overseas applicants, "We cannot accept pupils whose English is not good enough."¹

Once enrolled in any Anglophone school, students encounter English both as the means for education and as a subject itself. In places where English is expanding as a first and second language, universities like the National University of Singapore specify English as the language of instruction, while most universities in English-dominant areas and even in some non-Anglophonic countries (such as Sweden and the Netherlands) simply, though not always easily, take this as a given. At the University of Washington, an increase of Chinese students paying non-resident tuition has supplemented the university's operating funds but also has created challenges in the classroom that hinge on the definition of English. According to the director of writing in the College of Arts and Sciences, "We recognize that people from other countries often speak with an accent. If we're truly going to be a global university . . . we have to recognize that they may write with an accent as well."² The need for schools and universities to confirm students' English proficiency, increasingly in the form of standardized tests and assessment, dominates curricula, just as the students themselves face the need to score high marks in order to advance through education and into well-paying careers. Partly to meet such requirements, programs for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to non-native speakers have proliferated. By preparing speakers for jobs as well as university instruction, the industry of instruction in second-language acquisition uses a definition of English not only to open financial opportunities for its students but also to generate a significant financial return for itself.

Outside the business of second-language acquisition, senses of English may be less rigorous but still financially and professionally consequential. Perhaps improbably, the notion that there's money to be made in the meaning of English in fact has a long history predating modern ESL programs. When Dr Johnson produced his massive and ground-breaking two-volume *Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755, he did so via the common eighteenth-century process of subscription, which may not have made him wealthy, but did make the book possible, and the book in turn eventually led to his getting a pension from King George III. Joseph Priestley's 1761 *Rudiments of*

English Grammar, which appeared in nine issues before 1800, was widely used by subsequent grammarians and at least in part led to a job offer at the Warrington Academy in Cheshire. More remunerative still was Bishop Robert Lowth's 1762 *Short Introduction to English Grammar*. This went through 45 editions by the end of the century, making money for someone if not necessarily Lowth himself, who died in 1787. Lindley Murray's 1795 *English Grammar* may be among the most lucrative grammars of all (though again not for the author, who died in 1826): in the nineteenth century, the book's three versions were issued over 300 times.³

Potential financial gain may in fact, as much as anything else, account for the proliferation of grammatical materials in the eighteenth and nineteenth (as well as the twentieth and twenty-first) centuries.⁴ Beyond all manner of frequently reprinted academic books (such as John Earle's *The Philology of the English Tongue* or William McGuffey's various *Eclectic Readers*) the nineteenth century witnessed publications like *Poor Letter H*, which promised users the accent modification (in this case elimination of 'dropped h') that would lead to personal and professional success. It's the same promise made today by print and online programs like *Lose Your Accent in 28 Days*, *American English Pronunciation: It's No Good Unless You're Understood*, and *English Grammar for Dummies*. To attract paying customers, such programs target stigmatized regional varieties like 'New Yawkese' and speakers whose first language is not English. With red ink, scattered upper-case graphs, and a bold font, one web program claims, "We **GUARANTEE** that people will begin **COMPLIMENT-ING** you in only 7 days, or we will **REFUND** your \$9.95 during the first week! Try it **NOW!** You've got **ABSOLUTELY NOTHING** to **LOSE** but your Accent!"⁵ Since speakers' enrollment indicates that they already believe their success is tied to language, and not to any other personal characteristics they might have or to the prejudices of those doing the hiring, those whose lives do not improve after the course may attribute their failure to not having worked hard enough. And so the programs' definitions of English generate revenue

from new participants as well from those whose failures make them try harder.

It may be that speakers respond only to a perception of English or an accent (the *what* of my title), but the consequences of their response (the *why*) are no less for this. A 2006 survey of 9,000 individuals from nine different countries thus found that American customers “balk more at customer service agents with hard-to-understand accents than with those who don’t understand the problem they are calling about.” “Even if the level of customer service is exceptional,” the survey showed, “the extent to which poorly-understood accents trump quality of service speaks to English-speaking customers’ growing intolerance of non-native speech, more so than in other countries.” With “86% of respondents . . . likely or very likely [to] move to a competitor following a poor experience,” companies and their clients have a great deal invested in the definition of English. Or, as another study assesses the role of English from within an American business model, “English language skills have been put on equal standing with formal schooling and on-the-job-training, and viewed as a form of human capital that has been acquired at current cost in the expectation of future returns.”⁶

The assessment is well justified. As the language of international business and some of the largest multinational companies, English has been called “the language of capitalism . . . either the modernizing panacea or the ruthless oppressor, depending on your place in the world.”⁷ While recognition of English’s impact may be uniform, it’s clear that what matters (and varies) is not simply English in general but a specific definition of the language, with some kinds of English in effect being more English than others. In 2000, Singapore’s Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tung, thus said, “If we speak a corrupted form of English that is not understood by others, we will lose a key competitive advantage. My concern is that if we continue to speak Singlish, it will over time become Singapore’s common language.”⁸ One study suggests that “where an alien from Mexico can read and speak English, earnings are nine percent higher than for those who possess only one or neither of these language skills,” and another that speakers “with poor fluency face a 25.5% wage penalty.”⁹ Mexican Americans or immigrants who speak English with an accent readily

identifiable as Mexican, that is, earn less than Mexican Americans who cannot be so identified. They also earn less than individuals who speak with the regionally characteristic accents of earlier generations of immigrants, such as German or Italian. Speakers with characteristically French accents, in turn, enjoy better hiring rates in the United States than do those with characteristically Japanese accents.¹⁰

English, then, is often understood to be something that second-language speakers do or do not approximate, depending on non-linguistic issues of ethnicity and with significant economic results. In 2008, the United States Ladies Professional Golf Association went so far as to issue a directive that, by the following year, all of its members (many of whom speak Korean or Japanese as their first language) had to be conversant in English or run the risk of suspension from the golf tour. The rationale for the directive may have been arguable, but it at least was easily stated: given the tour's dependence on corporate sponsorship, the ability to speak English is a crucial marketing tool. In the words of Libba Galloway, the Association's deputy commissioner, "The suspension demonstrates the importance we are placing on effective communication in English, something that is vital to the success of our business and to the success of our membership."¹¹ By targeting Asians who already spoke English with non-native accents and grammars, the directive presumed a specifically American definition of the language. Golfers could not get by speaking just any variety of English with any accent; they had to speak a particular kind of English.

National identity depends just as significantly on definitions of English. The official requirements for United States citizenship specify, for example, that applicants "must be able to read, write, speak, and understand words in ordinary usage in the English language."¹² At present, hundreds of communities have enacted laws requiring English for advertisements, business transactions, social services, and so forth, while 31 individual states legally identify English as their official language. One of these states (Arizona) has a provision in its state constitution that "the ability to read, write, speak, and understand the English language sufficiently well to conduct the duties of

the office without the aid of an interpreter, shall be a necessary qualification for all state officers and members of the state legislature.”¹³ Law courts have heard cases about employers’ rights to require English in the workplace, and legislatures have made laws that mandate the circumstances under which Anglophone translators or non-English voting materials must be used, as well as (by implication) those for which English alone is necessary.

Underlying these legal (and economic) consequences, are the cultural ramifications of English, however it’s defined. To speak a variety judged as Standard English, as opposed to one judged as non-standard or as an interlanguage (such as an intermediate language that occurs when a new language is partially learned) is to gain access both to the language’s historical literary patrimony and to its current status as the world’s first truly global language. This is the variety that allows one to say one shares a language with the Bill of Rights, Shakespeare’s plays, and the King James Bible, however unintelligible these writings might be today to some English-speakers. English serves as the password to a kind of cross-cultural, transhistorical club that one might or might not want to join, and it’s precisely this reason that can generate controversy for the language and its speakers. Agitation on behalf of official language laws, for example, arises in part from convictions over what a city or nation is or should be, and requiring English is a way to enforce views about society or ethnicity through language. Outside English-dominant areas, the language’s cultural ramifications can be just as volatile. In Rwanda, government efforts to foster broadly national identity have done much to unify indigenous ethnic groups. But one current way for Rwandans to distinguish between the Hutu and Tutsi groups is to refer to the former as “French speakers” and the latter as “English speakers,” based on the fact that many of the latter fled to Uganda after the 1994 genocide.¹⁴ English, then, is something that evokes the horrors of the past and encodes the tensions of the present. More broadly, among the harshest critics of the modern expansion of English at the expense of indigenous languages, knowledge of the language can reflect complicity in an insidious plan to repress local populations and establish Anglo-American ideology around

the world. In Robert Phillipson's view, English is "a kind of linguistic cuckoo, taking over where other breeds of language have historically nested and acquired territorial rights, and obliging non-native speakers of English to acquire the behavioural habits and linguistic forms of English."¹⁵

DEFINING ENGLISH: PRAGMATICS AND GRAMMAR

In circumstances like these, the definition of English (the *what*) falls within the realm of what's called pragmatics, or, roughly stated, language in action. From this perspective, whether in business or government, speakers produce a definition through actions that depend on that definition. So the hiring (or not) of job candidates on the basis of their command of English, the pronouncement of English as an official language, and the assertion that English is replacing the world's languages all necessarily imply some sense of the language's definition. Only rarely do such pragmatic approaches define what they mean by English, and they don't do so particularly well. One accent-reduction book states that it will teach "the standard American accent. Some people also call it 'broadcaster English'. It's the kind of standard, neutral speech that you hear on CNN and in educated circles."¹⁶ But there's nothing here about particular linguistic structures, and "neutral," of course, is a loaded term that points to the pipe dream of an accentless variety. The American 'no child left behind' law of 2001 does little better with its definition of Limited English Proficiency, or the threshold for entering mainstream classrooms. Here again the definition is formed not structurally but as a function of age, place of birth, native language, and other unspecified difficulties that prevent students from achieving in the classroom or participating fully in society. The state of South Carolina defines students with limited proficiency more narrowly and less precisely as "students for whom English is a second language."¹⁷ We might disregard the conceptual problems with these educational definitions, which could mark a fluent bilingual as limited and a native illiterate 16-year-old as proficient, but we are still left with explanations that are mostly pragmatic in the way they focus on where or how English is used. And even these

definitions are rarities. More typical, especially in legislation, is a simple statement like the following, which appears in a proposed English Language Unity Act of 2009: “The official language of the United States is English.”¹⁸ Such legislation may go on to detail how this proposition affects education, naturalization, and the posting of laws, but no bills that I’ve seen define just what they mean by ‘English’. Which pronunciations? Which words? Which syntax? Which varieties? How good enough (to return to Harrow) is good enough English?

These kinds of questions might better be described as grammatical—as having to do especially with the formal codification of language in dictionaries and grammar books. Codification, or the prescription of correct usage, may be the most popular sense of just what ‘grammar’ means, and, by extension, of what English is. Indeed, in leaving unstated just how they understand English to be defined, many of the pragmatic senses that I’ve considered seem to appeal tacitly to grammar in this sense. When the Language Unity Act states that English will be an official language, it’s likely that it intends not Singlish, or African American Vernacular English, or even ‘New Yawkese’, but whatever structures that can be located in works of codification and that appear in so-called mainstream domains, including schoolrooms. Another sense of grammar should also be mentioned, however. And this is a descriptive sense used particularly by linguists. It seeks only to characterize what typical speakers of the language typically do with it, whether the characterization is a traditional account such as the one found in Randolph Quirk’s *Comprehensive Grammar*, a generative account such as that in Noam Chomsky’s landmark *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, or the recent analyses of individual varieties of global English, such as *The Handbook of World Englishes*.

Yet if all these conceptions of English seem categorically different from pragmatic senses—fixed descriptions as opposed to variable interpretations—it’s important to recall three things. Firstly, any speaker always draws on both kinds of definition. Teachers of English or contestants on a quiz show might invoke the grammatical senses, but when even they meet

people on the street or in a restaurant, it's the pragmatic senses that matter most. If we are fluent in English, we don't carry on conversations by consulting grammar books and asking ourselves whether what is said qualifies as English, but by the simple criterion of whether we can—and perhaps want to—understand the person with whom we're speaking. Secondly, creating, citing, or presuming grammatical definitions are themselves examples of language in use, or pragmatics. Language is not defined in the abstract, that is, but in particular circumstances by particular speakers, whether they be Dr Johnson, Noam Chomsky, or the author of *Lose Your Accent in 28 Days*. And thirdly, to accommodate the historical change and contemporary variation of English, any work of codification has to operate at a fairly abstract level. This means such a work must bracket off from discussion a good deal of what might be called the structural laxity that speakers tolerate in order to communicate and see themselves as part of a broad Anglophone community. In fact, much (maybe most) of what is simply called English—by pragmatic or grammatical criteria—is incomprehensible to many speakers who otherwise regard themselves as Anglophones.

Such difficulty in comprehension is particularly apparent when we look at the earliest stages of the language. If we open the tenth-century Old English epic *Beowulf*, we read (or maybe just see):

Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
 beodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
 hu ða æbelingas ellen fremedon.¹⁹

But even though written much closer to the present—postdating major linguistic changes in syntax and vocabulary—the language of Milton's *Paradise Lost* can be just as impenetrable, as in the following passage, where Satan gazes on Eve in her unfallen condition. Having taught this poem many times, I know that modern readers are sometimes baffled how the “goodness” evident in Eve's appearance and character should seem unpleasant and terrible (“awful”) to a character as committed to evil as the devil:

... Abasht the Devil stood,
 And felt how awful goodness is, and saw
 Virtue in her shape how lovely; saw, and pin'd
 His loss...²⁰

Even English uttered within the past century can prove obscure, as in the classic 1946 holiday film *It's a Wonderful Life*. There, Nick the bartender enigmatically tells a transformed George Bailey, experiencing life as it would have been if he'd never been born, "I don't know you from Adam's off ox." This is the case as well in James Kelman's novel *How Late It Was, How Late*, published in 1994, in which a fairly typical passage of narration reads, "And there were shoppers roundabout; women and weans, a couple of prams with wee yins, all big-eyed staring at him; then a sodjer was here and trying not to but it looked like it was too much of an effort and he couldnay stop himself, he stuck the boot right in, into Sammy's belly, then another."²¹ And if, for the time being, we include Hawaiian Pidgin English as a variety of English, we encounter language still more detached from whatever the drafters of the Language Unity Act had in mind and from whatever many Anglophones find normal or intelligible: "You speak you want one good Japanese man for make cook."²²

Examples like these could of course be multiplied many times over, but all to the same effect. And the fact that we can construct convincing, empirical explanations for such obscurities does little to diminish just how much linguistic variation and change any definition of English must accommodate or disregard. Knowing that Milton evokes the literal sense of 'awful' ('full of awe', and so 'awe-inspiring') underscores the painful irony of Satan's contemplation of Eve: he is at once fully aware of her noble virtue and miserably unable to accept "goodness" as anything positive. And if we had the knowledge of a 1940s audience, which was more familiar with rural life than we are, we'd know that the 'off ox' was the animal on the right in a team of two. The driver walked beside the left-hand one, and as a result could become far more familiar with that one than with the off ox. When this ox was Adam's, himself already a measure of the unknown ("I don't know you from Adam"), a kind of double distancing took effect.²³

But understanding the flux of linguistic change and variation goes only a very small way towards creating unity for such structurally diverse examples. If we are going to refer to them all by one name—English—lots of questions remain. Why and how, we might ask, have 1,500 years of recorded linguistic variation been designated ‘English’? If the poet of *Beowulf* could meaningfully say “Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum”; if Milton could use ‘awful’ as he did and if the script writer of *It’s a Wonderful Life* could presume an audience that would know what an ‘off ox’ was, and if not only contemporary Anglophones can fail to understand them all but also these writers themselves would likely have failed to understand one another, how is it that we call what all of us have spoken and written by the same name? How can we use a single label for the language, even though some changes can affect only some varieties, much as the Celtic languages initially affected the English used today in Ireland and Wales?²⁴ Inasmuch as what we call English does not evolve everywhere (or for all people in a given area) in the same way or at the same rate, on what basis, material or theoretical, can we say that they all speak the same language? For what reasons do we believe that English describes both what I speak and what Kelman writes? Or Milton and the *Beowulf* poet but, perhaps, not speakers of Tok Pisin, Mobilian Jargon, or Afrikaans? Would it matter whether Hawaiian Pidgin English were categorized as a regional variety of English or as a distinct linguistic code? For that matter, for what reasons is English *not* categorized as a regional variety of German or Norwegian? Even if we designate each of the examples I’ve given as a sub-variety, so that *Beowulf* is written in Old English and Kelman writes Scots English, English remains the underlying continuity in all these varieties. And that continuity implies some sameness, something essential shared among all the varieties that qualify as English, something that motivates histories of the language and its literature, and justifies claims for shared traditions. Again: what is English? And how do we know?

Clearly, the simple criterion of intelligibility isn’t an exclusive consideration in the language’s identity, since *Beowulf* remains unintelligible to most modern Anglophones, while if *Paradise Lost* initially seems intelligible—as in the account of Satan’s

gaze—it often really isn’t. From the opposite perspective, an utterance like the following may fail to meet several kinds of grammatical criteria for English but nonetheless makes sense: “Store go wants me.” Moreover, as I’ll suggest in Chapter Five, intelligibility can be as much a matter of attitude as linguistic fact. English-speakers who express their view on language in a similar way to that sometimes expressed about art—saying they might not know English but they know what they speak—are often also saying something about those to whom they want to speak. When we want to understand someone, for whatever social or practical reason, we are far more likely to accept that person as an Anglophone than we might otherwise be.

Equally limited as a determination of what is and is not English would be speakers’ geographic location, a criterion present since the Anglo-Saxon days of the Venerable Bede. There certainly are countries in which English is either a declared official language or functions as a *de facto* national language, used by the majority of speakers, in the majority of domains, for the majority of the countries’ histories. But even so, not every speaker in (for example) the United Kingdom, Canada, or the United States speaks or spoke English. By the same token, Anglophones speak and reside throughout the globe in areas where English is not predominant and where other languages may in fact be official, as in Belgium and Switzerland. The vast majority of those who speak English today speak it as a second language and inhabit areas where English has not been the historically dominant language, at least in terms of the numbers of speakers.

Definitions that rely on an ideal rooted in matters of structure, such as phonology, morphology, and syntax, have their own problems. For one thing, as the excerpts from *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost* demonstrate, these may change across time and vary at any given moment, complicating the transhistorical way in which English is understood to exist. We call it the same language, that is, even though its form can and has changed radically. And for another, even if we can demonstrate historical continuities and connections, doing so offers little by way of a stable sense of just what English is. So, *geardagum* doesn’t look or sound (‘yaredahguhm’, approximately) like anything any

contemporary Anglophone would utter, but the first element has ‘year’ as its reflex and the second ‘day’. The *-um* ending marks a dative plural. Like most of English’s original inflectional endings, this one atrophied in exactly the same way throughout the language when word order became increasingly important in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The ending left no trace behind, and it is because of analogy with the historical nominative plural ending that nearly all modern English nouns show *-s* everywhere in the plural. All of which means that *geardagum* is, in some sense, the same as ‘year-days’. But however explicable this history is, and even if the meaning of *geardagum* is at least largely transparent, the word still fails to qualify in shape or meaning (or sound, for that matter) as anything acceptable within any sense of English today. And the real problem with using morphological continuity as justification for the *what* of English is that it relates so poorly—maybe not at all—to the *why*. Everything I’ve said about *geardagum* is true, but none of it explains the gate-keeping role of English, or the fact that some accents can be considered closer to English than others, or the reason that anyone would want to make English an official language.

It’s worth pausing here, as we survey the difficulty of defining English, to consider how today it’s not just the language but its speakers who differ from those of the past. As recently as 1950, when the world’s population would have been about 2.3 billion, fewer than 400 million people spoke English.²⁵ The fourfold growth of this population in the intervening years is unprecedented; indeed, there’s nothing remotely like it in any period of any language’s recorded history. But just as radical—more so, in fact—have been the changes in the demographics of English speakers. In 1950, well over half of the world’s Anglophones resided in the English-dominant areas that Braj Kachru has described as the Inner Circle: the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. The populations of these regions certainly have increased since the Second World War. In the United States, where the population grew from 123 million to 132 million between 1930 and 1940, the 2010 census records 309 million people, over 80% of whom speak only English and an additional 10% of whom speak English along

with another language. During the same period, the United Kingdom's population has grown by about 15 million to almost 63 million in 2013, nearly all of whom likewise can speak English, mostly as a first language. The remarkable thing is that, together, these and other areas of first-language use now account for only about 25–30% of the world's Anglophones. In other words, even as the total number of Anglophones has quadrupled and English has expanded in domains unknown (such as the Internet) or barely known (such as international business) before the Second World War, the percentage of Inner Circle speakers among the world's Anglophones has dropped significantly. The number of individuals who speak English as a first language has similarly declined in comparison to those who speak all other languages. In 1950, such speakers accounted for 8% of the global population; by 2050, this percentage is predicted to be under 5%.²⁶

Because of changes like these, it's become commonplace to talk about the current state of English as not simply unprecedented but perilous in various ways. Speakers in Kachru's Inner Circle can worry that the language is deteriorating as it slips from their control, with a popular writer like Lynn Truss imagining that with the deterioration of formal, schoolbook grammar, specifically of punctuation, will come nothing less than the loss of communication and even civilization. But serious scholars worry as well. John McWhorter, for instance, equates the loss of cultivated language in the United States with the impoverishment of political discourse.²⁷ For their part, speakers outside Kachru's Inner Circle, such as Phillipson, can express anxiety over the fact that the global spread of English has led to the loss of indigenous languages and cultural individuality. According to such arguments, where English goes, Anglophone business and social values follow, erasing indigenous cultures and languages in their path.

As linguistic science has progressed in the past century, it's also become commonplace to speak about varieties of English in increasingly nuanced ways. Subtle classifications thus become ways to recognize linguistic differences even as they assert some overall integrity. Besides his Inner Circle, for example, Kachru refers to an Outer Circle (where English has been transplanted and become indigenous) and an Expanding Circle (where

English serves primarily as a second language).²⁸ Other critics distinguish English as a Native Language from ESL and English as a Foreign Language. Or they distinguish all three from the creole and pidgin varieties that language contact can produce. Or they speak about an ethnic and intellectual particularity for individual languages that is reflected in how words are used and that serves as the main framework among varieties of a language: if it looks like English at this abstract level, it must be English.²⁹

But one thing about English today is that as much as it has changed from English of the past, many qualities, both pragmatic and grammatical, have remained constant. We should say of many contemporary forms and uses of the language, I think, that they are unprecedented but not uncharacteristic. As unparalleled as the recent expansion of speakers and domains has been, for example, it builds on patterns present from the language's beginning. In the two centuries prior to the Second World War, English was already spreading across the globe, just as the population of Anglophones was already climbing. Between 1820 and 1932, perhaps 56 million people emigrated from Europe. Some 75% of these, whatever their homeland, ended up in English-speaking areas. And speakers from Anglophone areas were themselves just as given to traveling and taking their language abroad. While about one-half million emigrants left Great Britain in the eighteenth century, in the following century (broadly understood as 1815–1924) that number climbed to 25 million. This same pattern occurred but on a smaller scale in the United States, where eastern seaboard colonists gradually but insistently crossed the Appalachian mountains and spread throughout the West. Between 1790 and 1810 the population west of the mountains grew (by birth but mostly by immigration) from only about 100,000 to 1 million settlers. But in just the next half century, in what are now Midwest states like Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, the settler population increased from perhaps 650,000 to 7 million. In this same period the number of settlers increased from 150,000 to 4.6 million individuals in current southern and southwest states like Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas, while the immigrant population of Australia rose to 1.2 million (from 12,000) and to 1.4 million in Canada.³⁰ If one wanted to go far enough back (as I will in other chapters) one

could find similar patterns of demographic expansion accompanying linguistic growth and change in early modern colonization efforts, in the settling of Britain by continental Angles and Saxons, and, indeed, in the westward movement of Germanic peoples from their Indo-European homeland. Anglophones, in short, have always been moving, their demographics have always been shifting, their numbers have always been increasing, and the characteristics of their language have always been changing.

Another thing about English today is that the various ways in which the language can be defined have their own histories. These, too, might be described as unprecedented but not uncharacteristic. All such critical positions—pragmatic, grammatical, historical, and theoretical—are ultimately acts of imagination. They are ways of first conceptualizing facts like languages and their elements, and then identifying how these facts vary and change. There's nothing insidious in this—it's simply how cognition in the social sciences (as opposed to the natural sciences) works, and a feedback loop always makes it possible to redefine the facts. But as imaginative acts, any one of these positions cannot by itself refute another, categorically different way of defining English. In a sense, as different kinds of definition, mutual intelligibility and geography largely talk *past* one another. And this means that the *what* of English has always had and always will have as many answers as the *why* can invite.

HERACLITUS, HISTORY, AND HERITAGE

So far, I have approached this *why* in a fairly limited way: I've suggested English is important because we connect educational, financial, and political issues to it. But why do we do that? How is it that English—more so than other forms of social performance, such as clothing, hair color, or athleticism—should bear significance beyond anything to do with its apparently primary purpose, the simple act of communication? And for that matter, the *what* remains in doubt as well, since any definition ought to be able to accommodate the fact that a variety of sometimes conflicting definitions already exists. To get at these points, as

well as at the argument of this book, I want to take a metaphor from antiquity.

The Greek thinker Heraclitus, who wrote and lectured in Ephesus around 500 BCE, might be called the philosopher of flux. To Heraclitus, the world is not the stable product of stable phenomena but rather an ongoing process in which conceptual opposites and the continual change of experience are inevitable and necessary. More than this, whatever stability there is in the world arises from these very discontinuities. However discrete and even contradictory individual moments might be, says Heraclitus, they nonetheless produce a coherence that renders the moments and their continuity meaningful. One of the central beliefs of Heraclitus's philosophy is thus a paradox: life's discontinuities fabricate the unity that holds all life together.

What we know of Heraclitus comes from a series of fragments and from quotations in others' works, and so we might well consider the present condition of his writings to be an apt metaphor of the flux and continuity he explained. But a river provides a metaphor that is just as fitting. On one hand, in some intuitive sense, since a river's course and momentum may remain essentially unchanged for many years, the river has a unity and integrity that enable us to speak of the same river at various moments and at various locations up and down stream. It is the same River Thames, whether we see it upon Westminster Bridge or from Oxford, and likewise the same whether we view it from Hammersmith on a Monday or a Friday. On the other hand, since water keeps moving, streaming away and being replenished by still more water, fluctuating with the movements of the tide, the river's identity constantly changes. It can never contain precisely the same waters flowing in precisely the same way. The paradox of a river is that for it to retain its unity as a river, it must always be changing. Because of this Heraclitus once said, "For those who step into the same rivers, other and still other waters flow."³¹

As a philosopher, Heraclitus thus shares more with Kant and his emphasis on perception than with Locke and his emphasis on empirical experience. In Heraclitus's philosophy, as the flowing of the river prevents us from stepping a second time into precisely the same water—but not the same river—so the

flowing of time prevents us from visiting the same place twice, or hearing the same piece of music twice, or eating the same meal twice. Bœuf bourguignon may always be bœuf bourguignon, but having eaten one serving, we can never eat that very same serving again. For rivers and meals alike we nonetheless perceive unity and transhistorical identity in these sometimes discontinuous experiences, and we do so in largely similar ways. Partly this happens through repeated structural components—bœuf bourguignon must always have beef and the Thames must always follow what we tautologically define as the Thames riverbed. And partly it happens through an imaginative act, rooted in a set of facts and theoretical propositions that enable us to accept differing iterations of meals and rivers as the same. It is through this act that we can posit and recognize unity in what are inescapably disparate phenomena.

Simple as it is, Heraclitus's river has much to commend it as a metaphor for thinking about language and the complex questions of this book. To take a straightforward example, while we can repeat words and phrases, the flowing of time prevents us from speaking the same utterance twice. We might believe ourselves to do so, just as we might imagine ourselves to continue to speak the same language. But even if we use identical words and expressions in similar circumstances, they will never be exactly the same and our language will never be static. For one thing, our intonation and articulation will necessarily differ, since that kind of variation is inevitable in human speech, with its sensitivity to environment, a speaker's physical and emotional well-being, and the nature of what's being talked about. We might pronounce the same word very differently, depending on whether the temperature is hot or cold, whether we're climbing a flight of stairs or sitting on a chair, and whether it figures in a mundane request for the correct time or an emotional appeal for assistance from a bystander. For another, even very similar circumstances are not absolutely identical. We may twice say the same thing to the same person in the same setting—like a frustrated parent or teacher—but the mere fact that the second occasion repeats the first can mean that it has a pragmatic emphasis that was initially absent.³²

As the second or third utterance of the same form can differ from the first, so too can the overarching grammatical and discursive system composed of such particular utterances—a speaker’s linguistic competence. When reflecting on our personal linguistic histories, whether those histories are six or 60 years in length, we all confront numerous examples not only of the situational variation I have described but also of how our language itself has changed. For some individuals, the English they speak today might be a secondary language, acquired in school or adulthood as a supplement to (and maybe replacement of) a birth language. But even those who understand themselves to have spoken only one language all their lives know, upon reflection, how much that language has changed for them—how today they might use some words and expressions only in certain circumstances, how the slang of their youth has diminished, and, if they have particularly good memories, how they mastered new vocabulary and even difficult pronunciations as they matured. They might have always spoken the same language, but they never twice spoke it in precisely the same way.

What provides obvious confirmation of the continuity behind such flux and what allows us to say we have spoken just English since birth are our lives. Our speech may differ as we age or move about, but to the extent that we recognize our own integrity (despite inevitable changes in personality, circumstance, and so forth) we are ourselves corroborations of the fact that we still speak the same language. Speakers’ recollections of awkward moments when they first realized that they had been regularly mispronouncing or misusing a particular word also remind them of the discontinuities and transitions in their speech habits over time, as does the occasional realization, which seems to increase with age, that one once knew a word (or its meaning) that’s now faded away. In this sense, every Anglophone might be regarded as living proof of the discontinuous continuity of English for him- or herself.

If we multiply any individual speaker by the number of Anglophones today—conservatively, 1.5 billion, including those who know English as a second language—and then by the number of those who have known it since the days of *Beowulf* (perhaps another billion and a half?) we arrive at a

fantastically large population, all of whom have some historical, grammatical, or social claim to speak the same language, however much any one individual's language may have varied from another's or diverged from that of an earlier speaker. Simply by designating the collective utterances of this enormous population as English, we necessarily invoke Heraclitus's paradoxical notion of a continuity that builds from (and transcends) the discrete, changing moments of spoken language in time. Like Heraclitus's river, English is indeed a paradox. Like a river, the language contains basic structural elements (phonology, syntax, and morphology) that swell, contract, and change through different periods in time and different places, never apparently acting the same way twice. And as with a river, we nonetheless manage to find unity in this undulating linguistic record, accumulated from billions of speakers from across the entire globe.

All this is certainly not to say that English cannot be and has not been defined among the changing forms and varieties of its histories. Quite the contrary. There are lots of definitions, explicit and implicit in speakers' conversational practices and world views, in histories and grammars of English, in commercial hiring practices, in pedagogical objectives, and in government policies on voting, immigration, and citizenship. Using Heraclitus's metaphor, we might say that these definitions are maps that, like maps of a river, both point to certain empirical features but also depend for their integrity on an observer's judgment. And the diversity of maps of English points to the diversity of those who would define the language and of those whom they would include in their definition.

Every English-speaking person achieves that designation by meeting some arguable (if not always expressed) criteria for defining the language. We might say that Anglophones are those understood to have stepped into the same linguistic river, even as that river constantly varies and changes through fluctuations in its forms, speakers, registers, dialects, domains, grammars, cognate languages, historical stages, creoles, pidgins, and co-existent languages. To identify any main channel for the river of English, whether individually or in groups, speakers need also to locate the tributaries, distributaries, estuaries, watershed, and the bodies of water that are unconnected to it.

Less metaphorically, they need to exercise an imaginative act by which they can identify, discriminate among, and respond to both variation at a particular moment and change across time. Any grammar or history of the language thus runs the perhaps inescapable risk of becoming an exercise in question-begging. It must at the outset presume the category English in order to exclude non-English utterances and to select and assemble evidence of the language's nature and development for whatever breadth of identity or length of lifespan that one attributes to the language. And the lifespan of English, of course, is question-begging as well.

In a fundamental way, by extension, any map (or grammar) that distinguishes English from not-English is neither self-evident nor value-free. Indeed, as in part an act of imagination, by pointing to different histories such definitions point as well to different beliefs about the character of the language and the culture it enables. The standard-based conception of the language that prevailed into the twentieth century restricts the river of English only to the channels that flow through literate, primarily British English. A more expansive conception would include the large Anglophone nations in Kachru's Inner Circle but still exclude all areas of second-language acquisition. A still more expansive conception would accept the channels occupied by regional and non-standard varieties in these areas of native speakers. Kachru and others would broaden the watershed of English even more, to include some or all global varieties that are often considered non-standard, such as Black South African English and Chinese English. And perhaps the most expansive conception of the river of English would include interlanguages like Kriol (spoken in Belize), Spanglish (a mixture of Spanish and English), and a historical variety like the blend of Latin, French, and English used in some fifteenth-century business records. Each of these conceptions of English in some way has to precede the evidence, to pre-determine what English is, in order to allow for adjudication between, say, pronunciations or words that are non-standard, regional, or non-English. And in doing so, each conception affects how the history of English is written, what's taught in grammar and preparatory schools, how powerful domains of business and government are

conceptualized, and how command of English relates to the dynamics of Anglophone societies.

The most influential of these maps of the nature and history of English have rendered much of the language's diversity as streams and offshoots whose interest lies primarily in the way they have sustained or clarified an abstract main channel of the sort imagined from the days of the Anglo-Saxons to those of Chomsky's ideal speaker-listener. In 1905, the great Victorian philologist Joseph Wright suggested that, once these branches had fulfilled their purpose of producing a standard, they would dry up and vanish:

There can be no doubt that pure dialect speech is rapidly disappearing even in country districts, owing to the spread of education, and to modern facilities for intercommunication. The writing of this grammar was begun none too soon, for had it been delayed another twenty years I believe it would by then be quite impossible to get together sufficient pure dialect material to enable any one to give even a mere outline of the phonology of our dialects as they existed at the close of the nineteenth century.³³

Wright, of course, was wrong: certain dialect forms have disappeared, but dialects themselves remain, simply because regional variation is inherent in any language that's spoken across a broad expanse of land. Further, even if some British dialects are less distinctive than they were in Wright's day, new ones, involving West Indian contact for example, have come into existence. But Wright's views do provide a gloss on all definitions of English. Even empirically based definitions, much less pragmatic ones, can be more intuitive than factual, resting on a Platonic ideal of English that emerges particularly clearly in the early modern period. They chart the main channel of the language in the development of Standard English from the written variety preferred by early modern printers and late-medieval court officials. And on this chart regional forms and varieties not in this channel (along with their speakers) may be historically useful and interesting but remain fundamentally lesser and finally ephemeral, only peripherally connected to English, and the cultures and traditions it embodies. In our own minority-majority linguistic era, an era when second- and third-language

speakers outnumber native born Anglophones three to one, this Platonic ideal remains a powerful frame for defining English.³⁴

If Heraclitus helps us to conceptualize the *what* of a language that forever changes and yet retains some kind of stability for its speakers and their activities, he also provides a way to think about the *why*. And here I want to draw a distinction between history and heritage. By the former we typically understand an enterprise concerned above all with proof, with finding what is known and testable, with identifying the absolute truth. The nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke established this emphasis on showing the past “exactly as it happened” as the basis of modern historiography,³⁵ but the notion of an objective truth, of course, has a long history of its own. It is even perhaps embedded within Western literate culture as a kind of epistemological constant—as a necessity in how we imagine and think about the world. For there to be interpretations judged either right or wrong, that is, we seem to need a sense that there really is, or was, a reality. Otherwise, there can be no competing versions of history. And by extension, presumed objectivity would cognitively seem to require an invested, interpretive gesture like heritage.

While history looks for what’s known and testable, heritage looks for a past that will enhance and provide meaning to the present. Like history, heritage seeks truth, though it defines truth more impressionistically than factually. And like legend, it identifies a heroic age that can fashion unity, community, and cultural and political memory. We might thus think of history as the supposedly disinterested search for what happened, and heritage as the avowed impulse that gives us a reason to search in the first place. It is the product of creatively working with and thinking about the past, and in this regard heritage can use events, land, and language as malleable ways to construct not just any past but a meaningful one. Libraries, literary canons, and historical series like the Early English Text Society have all served this purpose. Dictionaries, grammars, and conceptions of who speaks a particular language have as well. Like eighteenth-century philology as understood by a Friedrich Wolf or Johann Eichhorn, heritage is what produces a memorable past against which a modern era can measure itself. Put simply, history

might identify the details of a battle, while heritage would marshal a parade in its honor.³⁶

In the abstract, a distinction between history and heritage makes a good deal of sense. In the sometimes messy realm of human experience things are less clear. Is English, for instance, history or heritage? Grammar books of all kinds, infused as they are with a Platonic ideal of the language, seem to regard the language as an objective truth, but when it's an impressionistic criterion for employment or citizenship, English clearly serves social agenda. Even if one were to retreat in time to a moment when the limits of English effectively overlapped with the limits of England—say, any moment between the sixth and sixteenth centuries—distinctions between history and heritage are sometimes no clearer. Partially this is so because during this millennium there is a relative scarcity of metalinguistic discussion of English—of comments specifically about the language. There are therefore certain things that we don't know and that we probably can't know. But mostly it's because it's we, and not medieval Anglophones, who are viewing in retrospect what happened and deciding what it means.

Phonological change and lexical borrowing seem objective enough, for example, and in many ways they are, but how they figure in the shape of a language, its variation, or its development have more to do with what we consider heritage because they depend on someone looking back at them for some reason. We use these phenomena to draw a map for the river of English: a shape of what the language is, of what its legitimate variants are, of which changes occurred in its history, and of where it's spoken. This same map distinguishes those who speak English from those who do not and, therefore, also those who can from those who cannot participate in the history, traditions, and privileges of Anglophone culture. Whether drawn by native Anglophones or second-language learners, maps like these are as much sociolinguistic exercises in heritage as they are historical witnesses. They depict how speakers imagine their relationships not just with the languages around them but with other speakers and the world as well. They image how the world appears or how someone might like it to be. And they are in

this sense as forever unstable, changing, and partisan as are the grammatical and pragmatic impulses to which they respond.

Heritage, then, is the *why* behind the various kinds of *why* I examined at the outset of this chapter. Why should so much importance be invested in a standard version of English? At least in part because doing so maintains certain institutions, traditions, and worldviews. Why would anyone want an official language? Because at least in the United States doing so furthers a particular vision of what it means to be an American. What's the *why* behind this *why*? Why would an official language relate to what it means to be an American? Here as at every other level of inquiry there are alternative answers. Perhaps an official language defines American identity because it responds to the propositions of the *Declaration of Independence* by creating a level of equal opportunity for all individuals. Or perhaps it does so because it provides specific advantages for some and disadvantages for others by furthering a sense that the country is fundamentally European and white, and that it is the responsibility of immigrants to conform through the idea of a melting pot.³⁷ And why would speakers believe that language can affect social reality in this way? Is it because there's something inherent in language that invites uses like this, or simply because there's precedent, a history of doing so? Like old-fashioned barbershop mirrors, heritage continues to reflect itself.

In the following chapters I explore various locales on the river of English, as it were. Even though I've questioned any neat distinction between grammatical and pragmatic definitions of the language, I have organized the chapters around this distinction because I think it makes the argument clearer. The first four thus focus on grammar, the next six, arranged chronologically, on pragmatics. Obviously, my approach is selective—a series of case studies—but it has two important arguments in its favor. Firstly, its selectivity mirrors the impermanence and changeability of English itself. There can be no one definition of English, I will argue, and so by extension all definitions can be only examples. And secondly, the moments I've selected prove to be among the most consequential in the language's history. Each in a very different way, these case studies consider why

and how—whether from a popular or an academic perspective—the unity of English has been identified in the changing, shifting forms of its use. And collectively they point to the conclusion that all definitions of English are situational. But they point beyond that, too. Building on Roger Lass’s notion that a language is “a population of variants moving through time, and subject to selection,” I will argue that one of the things subject to selection is the selection process itself—the methods and materials for writing definitions.³⁸ A definition may take into account the variability inherent in language, as Lass in fact does. Or it can ignore the variability or pronounce it wrong in order to posit a definition of language as something stable and abstract, as do critics as disparate as Chomsky and Bishop Lowth. But in either case, the methods are as subject to a kind of social natural selection as are the data they describe. I also will argue, then, that by nature the *what* and the *why* of English—the language’s history and heritage—have a kind of symbiotic relationship, each nurturing and giving rise to the other.

In one sense, my focus in this book is largely retrospective, since I look at how the mainstream of English has been drawn by grammarians, historical linguists, commentators, and speakers in general. In another, it’s contemporary, involving consideration of the current policies and attitudes that follow from this constructed history. And both views lead me to consider the future as well. Once we know what the river of English has been to this point, can we know where it will lead from here? Or better, where we want it to lead? In these ways, my intention is not to champion one definition to the exclusion of others, nor to resist the inevitable changes English has experienced as a natural language. It is rather to lay open both the necessity of imaginative choice over heritage in something as apparently categorical and historical as the definition of English as well as the inevitability of the social consequences rooted in that choice. How we define English goes a long way towards how we define the world in which it is spoken. And we care what English is because to a large extent defining the language amounts to saying who we are.

A WORD ABOUT 'WE'

In his short story "Xing a Paragrab," Edgar Allan Poe narrates the curious tale of a small-town printer who writes a stylistic tour de force in which the graph *o* appears at least once in nearly every word, only to have his compositor discover that all the *os* have disappeared mysteriously from the box of type font. Rather than rewrite the paragraph or print the newspaper with a blank space wherever the fourth most common letter in English ought to occur, the resourceful compositor substitutes an *x*, so that "told you so, you know" becomes "txld yxu sx, yxu knxw," "do be cool, you fool" becomes "dx be cxxl, yxu fxxl," and so forth. It is possible, as readers and the compositor discover, to tell a story without an important graph, but it's not easy to do so.³⁹

Writing a book about English that has at its heart questions about just what English means, I think I have a sense of the compositor's dilemma. I really should refrain from using the word 'English' or 'we', 'Anglophone', 'history of English', and 'indigenous'—all of which I've already used several times—because every time I do so I find myself engaging in question-begging, in presuming the very thing I'm trying to understand or prove. It's not the idea of distinctions between English and non-English or between Anglophones and non-Anglophones that's the problem. These are the distinctions that grammar books and pragmatic practices are designed to make and always have made, and what I do here is critique them.

Nor is there a problem in the fact that every example I study contains disagreements over and transformations of what English is or who we are, often with material consequences. Consider 'indigenous'. In the fourth century an indigenous Anglophone would have to have been born in northwest Europe, where the English-speaking ancestors of the Angles and Saxons lived prior to emigrating; in the tenth century in England; in the nineteenth century somewhere in Kachru's Inner Circle. Where do indigenous Anglophones live today, who decides, and why does it matter? (All I'll say here is that it certainly does matter.) Or we might think about two scenarios involving individuals who speak different language varieties. If a speaker from France

and one from England sit down to dinner, calling one a Franco-phone and the other an Anglophone would be uncontroversial. And having nothing invested in the label, the French-speaker would probably express small resistance to not being called an Anglophone. The speaker might even be flattered. But if a speaker of Singlish, a speaker of Standard American English, a speaker of African American English, a Chicano who speaks with a strong Mexican accent, and a speaker of Hawaiian Pidgin English apply for a job requiring fluency in English, calling one or more an Anglophone matters a great deal. Each of these speakers invests employment prospects, personal identity, or both in how we define and use words like ‘English’, ‘broken English’, ‘accented English’, and ‘ungrammatical English’.

One could say that these are words whose meanings get negotiated by speakers in what they say and do and that, inevitably, these negotiations result from conflicts of one kind or another. Moreover, their meanings are tantamount to a map of the river of English, and as such not only are these meanings variable at any one time and place but they change across time. What also emerges from the following case studies, then, is the unsurprising fact that some Anglophones are more equal than others. Some get to propagate definitions that have greater impact, whether in classrooms or in hiring practices, than others’ definitions. Some get to define a ‘we’ of the English speakers that includes them but excludes others who nonetheless regard themselves as Anglophones.

The problem I face, then, is that I have to use ‘English’, ‘we’, and the other words even as I try to define just what they mean in particular contexts. And I never found a way around these lexical dilemmas. Not by qualifying each use of ‘we’ with something obscure and ungainly like “socially dominant people who can enforce their own self-styled normativity through social institutions and ideology.” Nor by hedging each use of ‘English’ with “what is widely considered.” Nor by putting scare quotes around every occurrence of ‘history of English’, ‘indigenous’, and the rest. Not even by following Poe’s compositor and substituting *x* whenever one of these words otherwise would appear. On occasion I address the issue directly, but much of the time I simply let the words pass without comment.

If this disclaimer is a little unsatisfying, I think it can be justified in three ways. Firstly, one of the points of this book is that the meanings of words like these are situational, constructed by individuals to fit individual circumstances. Their meanings in any one situation—or any one case study—are therefore, in the first instance, limited to that situation and ought to emerge from what I say about that situation. Secondly, in every domain of English, as I have said, some speakers have more influence in deciding who we are and what English is. They are the speakers—nearly but not always native-born Anglophones rather than those who came to English as a second language—whose meanings have the greatest influence on linguistic usage and social practice, and most need examination. And thirdly—the one constant—everywhere in this book ‘we’ must refer as well to anyone who can read what I’ve written, since that reader is necessarily an Anglophone. That everyone who is part of this ‘we’ might not agree on just who we are, or on what English is, is another of the points I hope to make.

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PART TWO

English by the Books