The English of Broadcast News:
When English is Not the First Language of the Audience

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This paper will look at some of the issues surrounding the English of broadcast news from the point of view of both user and producer. It will refer to several frameworks derived from the teaching of English to speakers of other languages to argue that a greater knowledge of the needs of the non-native speaker could be beneficial to broadcasters. It will consider various initiatives that have been taken both to teach English through the language of the news and to help learners maintain their existing level of English, and – by way of exemplification – will also look briefly at the role of radio broadcasting in Africa. Finally, it will look forward to the effect on news English of new technology platforms including online and mobile, and the predicted increase in interactivity through blogs and vlogs, and will suggest two courses of action for future research on broadcast English.

1. Introduction: News is Important to Broadcasting Organisations – and to those Learning English

In this paper I will be speaking to quite a large extent from personal experience, and will thus make use of the first person pronoun – both singular and, when referring to events involving colleagues, plural. I spent my career initially as a classroom teacher and later, for 30 years, in the BBC’s English language teaching unit and will thus sometimes refer to events which are otherwise unreported, but which may incite others to carry out further research.

The news lies at the heart of the output of most broadcasting organisations. There are many reasons why non-native speakers of English should make their acquaintance with a station through its news bulletins. Perhaps the most important is their predictability – the structure of news bulletins...
remains constant whatever their length. There will be a top, highlighting the main points, a number of stories depending on the length of the bulletin, and sometimes a tail, summarising the main points. It is possible for learners to miss certain stories and yet be able to tune back into the bulletin at a point they will recognise, something that is far harder in a programme with a less predictable structure. The language, though including reports from different locations in a variety of accents, will be more controlled than in an unscripted discussion, and thus more predictable for the non-English speaker. Moreover, there is a considerable chance that over time learners will pick up specific aspects of ‘news vocabulary’.

Several definitions and distinctions are necessary, starting with potentially controversial terms such as ‘non-native speaker of English’ or ‘non-English speaker’. Although a handy way of segmenting an audience, they are apt to cause confusion and, sometimes, offence. An alternative phrase, a speaker who does not have English as their ‘mother tongue’, has fallen into disuse. A seemingly more objective substitute for ‘native English’, ‘English as L1’, can also be criticised, for, though it attempts to define English as the first of several languages that speakers may have at their disposal, it provides only a diachronic view, referring back to the phase of first language acquisition. A globally mobile citizen may well ultimately adopt the language of the country where they finally settle: if proficient in it, even if not in all registers or modes, that new language could arguably be described as their ‘second L1’ (see Coulmas 1981 and the contributions in Singh 1998). Whatever the linguistic distinctions, international broadcasters will be interested primarily in whether they can reach a large audience in English, or whether they would be better advised to broadcast in a range of languages.

Another distinction lies between, (1) ‘learners’, who are actively learning English, who will be discussed in Section 5, (2) those maintaining their existing level of English in an active fashion, for example by deliberately listening to broadcasts in English rather than their own language, and (3) those content to maintain such a level passively – by not avoiding English language broadcasts and web pages.

A further term which needs explanation is ‘audience’. It was originally used for theatres, but appropriated first by radio, then by television, and now by new media – internet and mobile platforms (such as mobile phones and PDAs). Referring only to radio, it is conventional to refer to the audience as listeners. If watching television, they are viewers. If only accessing news via websites, they are users. The distinction between a ‘lean-forward’ (active) and ‘lean-back’ (passive) medium was initially used to differentiate internet (which requires intervention through a keyboard and mouse or touchpad) from radio and TV, where an On/Off switch or simple remote control is sufficient. However, I would argue that for non-native speakers both radio and television present the linguistic requirement to engage actively.
2. Broadcasters, Language and Learners

It can be easy to imagine that because of the technical complexity of the production process – involving recorders, studios and transmitters – the language of broadcasts is harder for the learner than that of books. This is not necessarily the case, since the first contact most learners have with a new language is in its spoken, not written, form. Handbooks for journalists stress that broadcast language – often referring to the news – should be seen as spoken language. Harriet Gilbert puts this precept succinctly into this amusing picture:

All over the country, radio stations are dotted with writers talking to themselves at the keyboard, or standing in the corridor with eyebrows shooting all over the place and faces twisted into grimaces. If you can bring yourself to look that ridiculous […] you’ll have written a good script for radio. (Gilbert, quoted in Hicks 1998: 115)

There is, admittedly, the irony that while our first experience of language is as speech, English may still be taught primarily as a written language, and that while some school leaving exams insist on a spoken element, others do not.

The predictability of the structure of a news bulletin, as mentioned earlier, can help learners. Another scaffolding element lies in the most frequent lexical domains in bulletins. Volkmer (1999: 190), writing in the context of the way development issues are reported, compares broadcasting strategies by different types of news organisation (Public Service, Commercial), by different types of socio-political context (e.g. Post-communist Transition) and by type of event, including Conflict, Diplomacy, Festival/Celebration and, intriguingly, Curiosity. Besides its insight into the content of bulletins, such a paradigm can be useful for learners in defining and limiting the amount of vocabulary required to understand the concepts.

Most newsrooms in large broadcasting organisations will have a style guide to which journalists can refer at any time, and which will be mentioned in their induction to the station. It will codify general practice as well as issues specific to the station. Although potentially of interest to learners, style guides are very much in-house documents. By way of illustration, consider current practice at Radio France Internationale (RFI), the External Services of Radio France.¹

The English Service is one of 19 foreign language units within RFI, broadcasting in English mainly to Africa and the Far East. Their style guide, which starts from the premise that many of their listeners will not have English as their first language, has three parts.

¹ I am particularly grateful to Tony Cross and colleagues at the English Service of Radio France Internationale (RFI) for their help in preparing this paper.
An introduction states the principles of writing for radio in general and for their listeners in particular. The first, and perhaps most important point, is that journalists should imagine that they are writing for just one person. The RFI guide also provides practical help on writing for the appropriate language level of their audience, stressing that a story, once written, should be read aloud before going to the studio. A sentence that may be perfectly comprehensible in print form may sound odd when spoken out loud – and thus distract the listener. The pause required to work out the meaning may cause the non-native speaker audience to lose the thread of the story. The RFI guide stresses also that political, cultural and historical references which are clear in one country may not be clear in another. Vocabulary ‘should be as simple as the meaning allows.’

The guide goes on to list specific points that may trip up journalists writing in a hurry. They include three main categories. The first covers house journalistic style, mentioning for example how to refer to culture-specific concepts like parliaments, conventionalised names of reference, such as international agencies, and place names like cities (‘Milan’, not ‘Milano’). The second combines language and journalism and includes the need for care when making time references. Only some African countries are in the same time zone as Paris, so it may be safer to say ‘earlier today’ than ‘this morning’. There is a special section on specific words such as ‘terrorist’, ‘extremist’ and ‘community’ whose interpretations may vary vastly depending on a listener’s own political or social point of view. Finally come a number of language and production points. Large numerals should be written out. It is much easier in a live broadcast to read ‘three million, eight thousand’ than ‘3,008,000’. Non-gender-specific terms such as ‘synthetic’ rather than ‘man-made’ should be used. And the point about the inclusion of the sub-ordinating conjunction ‘that’, to be mentioned again in connection with the BBC Special English News in Section 5 below, is summarised memorably here in the phrase ‘Better to overthat than to underthat.’

The RFI style guide also contains appendices on a number of relevant topics including details of Arabic names, Chinese transliterations, the confusing Romanization of Asian languages and, since many of their journalists are bilingual in French and English, a reminder of the danger of ‘faux amis’, literally ‘false friends’. The French ‘actuellement’ means ‘at present’ in English, not ‘actually’; the French ‘assister’ means ‘to be present’, not ‘to help’.

3. The Ecosystem of the EFL Learner

News organisations will also find it helpful to find out about those of their users who don’t have English as their first language. There exist plenty of sources of information, which can be trawled at various depths. The per-
ceived needs of the English learner have over the past 50 years created a major global industry, involving a complex interdependent network of organisations including:

- Universities (which, among other things, train higher level students, research effective teaching methods and develop new theories of teaching and learning);
- Examination boards (which devise a range of exams for different ages, levels, skills and types of language);
- Education authorities (which allocate resources and implement changes in technology and learning methods);
- Private and public language schools;
- Publishers and specialist authors;
- Organisations for teachers of English – both international, such as IATEFL (the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and national, such as ETAS (the English Teachers Association of Switzerland);
- National and international cultural organisations such as the British Council, and finally
- Broadcasters who have experience in reaching a wide audience.

International broadcasters may well find that their users share common language learning experiences – with, perhaps, an attendant world view – and can be categorised surprisingly easily in terms of language comprehension. If a programme cannot be understood by a viewer from one country whose language level is known, then it is unlikely that a viewer from a different country with the same fluency level will suddenly understand it.

One example of the powerful cumulative effect of the different components in an English language teaching course came in the late 1980s and the 1990s with the ‘Follow Me’ project. This multi-country, multi-organisation project was devised to help adult learners who had missed out on English at school. The Council of Europe had at the time, under the guidance of John Trim, brought out new functional/notional language specifications – ‘Waystage’ and ‘Threshold Level’\(^2\) – which provided the first step to a syllabus devised by author and course designer Louis Alexander. Alexander’s syllabus consisted of a cyclical series of 10 themes, each one treated at greater depth in successive iterations. This flexible approach, enabling

\(^2\) These are now integrated into the Common European Framework, the scaffold for much European language learning. For more detailed information, compare the Council of Europe’s web-pages, in particular http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp.
broadcasters to schedule programmes in blocks of ten, with a built-in element of revision, proved ideal for the 60 quarter hour TV and radio programmes made by the BBC, Bavarian Television (BR), North German Television (NDR) and other European broadcasters. Learners who followed only part of the series would nonetheless come away with a usable introduction to the language. Longman, the BBC and partner publishers produced classroom and self-study materials (books for students and teachers, audio, video). The German Adult Education Authority (the Deutscher Volkshochschulverband) and partner organisations trained teachers in the methodology of using the new audio-visual materials. Other broadcasters produced their own version of the radio and TV series, most notably China Central Television (CCTV). Their version, presented by Kathy Flower, reached a totally new audience.

News organisations have at their disposal at least some points of reference for the type of prior exposure to English that their users may have had. For instance, one approach that broadcasters could usefully be aware of is ESP – English for Specific (or Special) Purposes. This formed the basis for an imaginative British Council sponsored project in Switzerland in 1998, the ‘ESP Anti-Conference’, which was carried on the BBC Learning English website, complete with video interviews. The concept of teaching frequent work-oriented elements of English to targeted groups of learners rather than the entire language to everyone may in part have come from excesses in the situational approach. It may be fine to teach general students to ask for information at the Post Office, to buy butter at the grocer’s, to suggest having a cup of coffee at the café. But if a group, say, of aeronautical engineers are working on a multi-national aircraft construction project, a different approach is needed – even if some of the underlying functional language is remarkably similar.

At first sight, this ESP model has little to do with ‘Understanding the News’, which has tended to find itself allocated to the Language Skills section of ELT libraries. It is true that the relevant skills can be taught and tested easily in class. Typical exercises could include the following:

Listening for gist:
*Summarise that 2 minute radio interview in three sentences.*

Listening for specific points:
*Who also attended the meeting with the Prime Minister?*

Extensive reading:
*Read these five news stories and place them in what you feel is their order of importance.*

Non-verbal Communication – Viewing for paralinguistic features:
*Watch this TV clip and describe the official’s reaction when the reporter asked if he would resign.*
But ESP does focus well on aspects of broadcast English that can cause problems even for advanced learners, such as the presence of extended interpolations in live discussions. In pre-recorded items sentences can be edited – or simply re-recorded. In live broadcasts the speed of what is happening can occasionally trip up even the most experienced presenters. And, in the same way that French, Russian or Chinese aeronautical engineers will bring their own knowledge and experience to an international project where English is the working language, so viewers and listeners will approach an English medium bulletin with existing media skills – for instance, the ability to evaluate the relevance and reliability of individual items.

The New Zealand journalist and sociolinguist Alan Bell (Bell 1991: 150) identified a number of areas of news language where problems of understanding can arise. One is the lack of correspondence between the narrative structure of a story and the time structure to which it relates. Using Labov’s narrative structure (abstract, orientation, evaluation, complicating action and resolution) he shows that the narrative sequence does not follow the actual temporal sequence. The reader, viewer or listener would intuitively be familiar with this journalistic convention from media in their own language. However, unless handled well, the precise arrangement of time references in English may cause a lack of total comprehension of the sequence of events for non-native speakers.

4. Objections to ‘Linguistic Imperialism’

Underlying the various influences mentioned in the previous section are two assumptions. The first relates to the practice of cultural diplomacy (maintaining national influence through means such as access to films and books at local cultural centres, and educational visits to the country in question.) It is the assumption that language forms a part of national identity, and that learning the language will create affective links with the country concerned.

International broadcasters have taught many languages over the years, with varying levels of accompanying political messages. In the late 1930s, the Nazi regime in Germany broadcast radio lessons to Germans living outside the Reich whose grammar was felt to be faulty. The BBC has been broadcasting English language teaching lessons since 1939. A dedicated department has existed since 1943, known successively as the Central Unit, BBC English by Radio (and, later, BBC English by Radio and Television), BBC English (see Leitner 1989) and, currently, BBC Learning English. In the 1970s Radio RSA, the external services of the former apartheid government of South Africa, produced Afrikaans radio lessons with an overtly political message, justifying a white presence in Southern Africa. Radio Moscow and its successor organisations broadcast Russian lessons. Deutsche Welle has
an excellent German teaching website and, somewhat more unexpectedly, since 1989 the Finnish broadcasting company YLE has been broadcasting ‘Nuntii Latini’ – the news in Latin.

The second assumption is that the teaching of a language such as English will necessarily relegate the importance of other languages. The concept of ‘linguistic imperialism’, introduced by Phillipson (1992), warned of the dangers of a ‘centre – periphery’ model, where knowledge of English was seen as one way of preserving a power structure in a post-colonial world. Pennycook (1994) develops this exploration of the implications of the spread of English. The growth of the internet in the early 1990s led initially to the expectation that cyberspace would be mainly Anglophone. But, with the arrival of internet friendly fonts for languages requiring more than the basic Latin alphabet, sites for languages other than English grew, such as the radio station in western Nigeria which started putting up funeral orations in Yoruba. Traditionally given by a praise singer, families appreciated the fact that the oration now had a more permanent reality – which, admittedly, they had to pay for.

Daniel Dor examines the linguistic consequences of globalization. He says that the internet (Dor 2004: 115) is indeed on the way to becoming a multilingual space – but that this does not necessarily bring with it the ideals of freedom of the early web users. The reason is mainly that ‘the agents of economic globalization have realised that adapting to local cultures and languages is a necessary component of staying competitive.’

5. Using the News to Teach English

Newspapers and journals have long been used in classrooms. Teachers enjoy asking students to explain the grammar points behind misleading, and quite possibly apocryphal, newspaper headlines such as ‘Giant waves down Queen Mary’s funnel’ (where Giant is an adjective rather than a noun); ‘General McArthur flies back to front’ (with front as a noun); and the geopolitical nuances of an alleged 19th century London newspaper headline, ‘Storm in Channel – Europe isolated’. More recently the Economist magazine carried a front cover with a picture of George Bush and Tony Blair and the caption ‘Axis of feeble’ (The Economist 13–19 May 2006) – a play on the phrase ‘Axis of evil’ providing interesting material for phonetics lecturers.

Broadcast news too has been used for language teaching and improvement. Early experiments in the use of radio to teach French are related by Clark (1930) (see also Hendrix 1932, for consideration of passive acquisition). French language teaching based on news items from francophone television stations reached mainstream BBC television in the 1980s with
‘Téléjournal’, a series presented by Chantal Cüer explaining the language of French TV news stories.

There can be a narrow dividing line between using news items to teach language, and broadcasting news stories using simplified language. In the 1960s the BBC’s English language teaching unit broadcast a dictation-speed news bulletin. A succession of news based programmes followed, including ‘News English’ (with explanations entirely in English) and ‘Current Affairs English’ (written in a ‘bilingual’ format with explanations in a variety of languages). Voice of America is well known for its ‘News in Special English’, which has been running since 1959. A team of specially trained journalists write stories using a core vocabulary of 1,500 words, available to listeners. Simple sentences containing one idea are read at around two thirds of normal speed.

In 1989 the BBC World Service began broadcasting its own BBC News in Special English usually referred to by production staff as the Slow Speed News. (The VOA team were courteous, if surprised, when we let them know that a similar title to their own had been used.) The production involved three departments: Newsroom, which provided the bulletin and checked the adapted version, Presentation, which trained newsreaders to read at roughly three quarters of the normal speed, and the English language teaching unit, which simplified the language. This process was somewhat different to that used by VOA, in that lexical simplification by means of a defining vocabulary was not used; syntactic simplification was applied to existing news stories instead.

A BBC English producer would go to Newsroom two hours before transmission, and be given the relevant bulletin by the sub-editor. The bulletin would then be ‘translated’ into simple English. The precise style of this translation depended to a large extent on the producer’s ‘native speaker ability’ to estimate which elements of the bulletin the listener would find hard. There was a time constraint – the bulletin had to be ready 15 minutes before transmission to allow the newsreader time to read it through and check with the BBC Pronunciation Unit if there were any unfamiliar words. These words were especially likely to be those of people and places that were either unfamiliar or had not previously featured in a story.

I regularly came away from the transmission aware that there were phrases that I could have expressed better. While it was quite easy to divide long sentences or add relative pronouns, the need to maintain Newsroom guidelines meant that it was not always simple to make the kind of alterations that English language teachers would instinctively make to aid comprehension.

As an example of the type of adaptation undertaken, here is a story from the BBC World Service 1500 hours GMT bulletin of 16 September 1994, first in its original form.
1. Officials from North Korea and the United States have ended several days of talks in Germany with North Koreans still refusing to bow to American pressure to buy nuclear reactors from South Korea.
2. Both sides described the talks as ‘full and frank’.
3. The Americans are pressing North Korea to replace its existing reactors, because they produce plutonium which could be used for nuclear weapons.
4. The head of the North Korean delegation, Kim Jong U, said the United States would have to finance the changeover, but his country reserved the right to find its own suppliers. [95 words]

The BBC News in Special English (Slow News) version read as follows.

1. Officials from North Korea and the United States have ended several days of talks in Germany.
2. The North Korean officials still refuse to listen to American demands to buy nuclear reactors from South Korea.
3. Officials from both countries said that the talks were ‘full and frank’.
4. The Americans are insisting that North Korea replace its existing nuclear reactors, because they produce plutonium which could be used for nuclear weapons.
5. The head of the North Korean delegation, Kim Jong U, said that the United States would have to finance the changeover, but that North Korea felt it should be allowed to find its own suppliers. [104 words]

The original first sentence has been split, dropping the ‘with … -ing’ construction, which, though quite common in bulletins, might be less familiar to non-native listeners. The phrase ‘full and frank’ is a common euphemism for ‘acrimonious’ in the context of diplomatic talks. However, it was left unaltered, although it may have not been fully understood by the listener, as we had no proof that ‘acrimonious’ was the correct meaning in this case. In sentence 3/4 ‘pressing’ – which might have been understood in its literal sense – was changed to ‘insisting that North Korea replace’ – which in retrospect also poses problems.

Informal testing of the Slow News bulletins at various times indicated that it was helpful to use ‘that’ after ‘say/claim/report’ – as mentioned earlier with reference to the RFI style guide. Also, in terms of presentation, some informal research into speed – one of the controllable variables – was carried out, and suggested that native speaker perceptions that the speed was too slow were not shared by non-native speakers. In terms of comprehension it seemed that chunking was important: not so much the length of pauses between sections, but where they were split up. Interpolations were a problem for speakers of Slavonic languages, while cultural references, perhaps more a problem for less experienced listeners, were explained where possible.
This applied to abbreviations such as NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) and GCHQ (the UK’s Government Communication Headquar-
ters) where either the organisation might be unfamiliar or its presentation as
a word rather than individual letters could cause problems. It also concerned
specifically UK based assumptions: for example, that the Prime Minister lives
in ‘Number 10’ (10 Downing Street), which can be used as a metonymic
reference to the Prime Minister.

It is important to stress that these Slow News broadcasts always involved
discussions with a Newsroom Sub-editor who had final say on the bulletin,
which had to be judged as a straight bulletin as well as a way of teaching
English or helping listeners maintain an existing level of English. As I have
previously said, all journalists aim to write as clearly and as simply as possi-
ble. The stress here was on extending the base of the listenership to people
who might not otherwise have tuned in to an English medium bulletin.

In 1989 a detailed examination of the language of broadcast news bulle-
tins occurred when the BBC joined with HarperCollins Publishers to produce
the BBC English Dictionary. The lexicographical work was carried out at
COBUILD (Collins Birmingham University International Language Database)
under the direction of the late John Sinclair. COBUILD already had a large
corpus of news material, primarily print-based. The BBC provided some 80
million additional words from the World Service Newsroom, with a further 9
million from National Public Radio, Washington (NPR). The language was
not ‘spoken language’ in the pure sense of unscripted speech. Rather, it was
written in the knowledge that it would be spoken into a microphone rather
than typeset into a page in a newspaper. The 70,000 citations from the BBC
content were compared with COBUILD’s existing news content and differ-
ences noted. The word ‘business’, for instance, appeared more frequently in
the COBUILD corpus, but new senses arrived with the BBC data: ‘business
as usual’, ‘do business with’, ‘the SDP is still in business’. ‘To marginalise’
appeared in the BBC, but not in COBUILD. There were differences in collo-
lacation for the word ‘zone’ between the BBC – ‘security zone’ – and COBUILD
– ‘free trade zone’.

The NPR data gave an insight into the English of American broadcast
news. It was possible to trace the introduction of new phrases such as the
military term ‘collateral damage’ (when troops or civilians are killed or
wounded accidentally by their own side). Originally, NPR commented this
phrase as ‘what the military refer to as collateral damage’. As the phrase
became more widely used they reduced it to “collateral damage” (the quota-
tion marks indicating to the newsreader that the phrase was not in common
use) and finally, as it was used more widely and also in metaphorically
extended ways, with no quotation marks. The morphological productivity of
American news English was much in evidence in other respects as well –
from familiar noun verb conversion – ‘the scud impacted the Gulf’ – to less
common back-formations, in this case from the noun *attrition* – ‘with all the air assets we have it will *attrit* a lot of the enemy’ and ‘with all of his losses he’s definitely being *attritted*.

In a review of *The BBC English Dictionary* for *The Modern Language Journal* Vol. 77 No. 3 Stephen Gaies (1993) notes the use of ‘ordinary English sentences’ – full sentence definitions – for collocations and restricted uses, such as one of the definitions for ‘succeed’: ‘If you succeed another person, you are the next person to have their job or position’ (*BBC English Dictionary* 1992: 1169). He also notes the absence of maps in the encyclopedic data. While their absence was in part due to cost and production factors, there was also the fact that the dictionary was being prepared at the time of the momentous political changes marking the break-up of the Soviet Union. New countries took some time to find precise English equivalents of their new names: Kyrgyzstan, for example, which for a time was also referred to as Kirgizia, Khirghizia and Kyrgyzhia (*BBC English Dictionary* 1992: 645).

6. Broadcasting in English in Africa

Perhaps one of the most famous models for the representation of World Englishes has been proposed by B.B. Kachru (1982) in the form of three concentric circles: the inner circle refers to those countries where English is a native language (ENL) and the outer circle to those where English is a post-colonial second language (ESL); the expanding circle, finally, includes countries where English is a foreign language (EFL). The second circle, therefore, includes, among others, Anglophone countries in Africa, an important audience for international radio broadcasters. The impact of broadcasting generally, including educational broadcasting, is instructive (Wilson 1952, Norbrook and Ricketts 1997). Language policy in Africa has been revisited over the years (Schmied 1991), with different emphasis being placed on the need for a standard model of English appropriate for an African country, or on the use of a language or languages other than English. It might actually be better to say ‘standard models of English’, since one model (discussed at various times by experts such as Professors Ayo Banjo and Ayo Bamgbose; see Bamgbose 1991) envisages different varieties of English for use at local level (in the Nigerian context between a group of adjoining states), national level (for use in the civil service), regional level (with adjoining countries) and internationally.

The administrative costs of language policy have directly affected broadcasters, as was pointed out by Apolo Nsibambi of Makere University (Nsibambi 1971) in his paper ‘Language Policy in Uganda: An Investigation into Costs and Politics.’ When Uganda achieved independence in 1962, he notes (1971: 62), ‘[…] Radio Uganda was broadcasting in English, Luganda,
Runyoro/Rutoro, Ateso and Lwo.’ In 1967 President Milton Obote added another ten languages. By 1969 yet more had been added, making a total of eighteen. Nsibambi, who became Prime Minister of Uganda in 1999, makes it clear that this was being done for political reasons – despite the excessive financial costs to Radio Uganda (1971: 64). He proposed a pragmatic solution, reducing the number of languages according to criteria including mutual intelligibility, population, utility, the past history of the linguistic situation and political factors.

While most people have little choice over the language used in their working lives, multilingual authors can decide which language best fits what they want to say – and how the process of reaching the audience should work. A highly publicised such case is the Kenyan author Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (Pennycook 1994: 264), who after a distinguished literary career writing in English took the decision to write in his first language, Gikuyu, and then have his books translated. Other authors have chosen to retain the English language as a means of literary expression in order to reach as wide a national and international audience as possible. This was the decision taken by the Nigerian author Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was executed by the Nigerian authorities in 1995. He was a member of the Ogoni people in the Niger delta, a source of great oil wealth to Nigeria as a whole, but wealth which he argued had bypassed his own people. He had previously written a television series Basi and Company, which had specifically used English to get his message across. His sole novel, Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English, which won an honourable mention in the 1987 Noma award for publishing in Africa, uses language which he describes as ‘rotten English’. It is a language that may not exist in reality precisely in this form but, made up as it is of elements taken from the linguistic landscape of contemporary Nigeria, captures both the leading character, forced to lead the life of a soldier, and the fractured nature of the Nigerian state at that time of the Biafran secessionist war. As Michael North puts it in his paper on Saro-Wiwa: ‘[…] to write in Khana, the language of the Ogoni people, would have made him unreadable to all but an infinitesimal handful of Nigerians’ (North 2001).

With another Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, who became famous in 1956 with the publication of his first novel, Things Fall Apart, there is an interesting link between the language used by the author and broadcasting. Achebe’s path to becoming a writer was influenced by the time he spent as a talks writer in the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 1997). He later became Head of Talks for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (as the NBS had become), later still working as Controller of the Eastern region and Head of the Voice of Nigeria. Ezenwa-Ohaeto notes the influence that the spoken word had on Achebe: ‘He was preoccupied with what makes speech memorable and cultivated the difference between a “literary style” and a “spoken style”’ (1997: 57).
7. New Technology

Until a few years ago, when wireless technology became common and laptop users started hunting for hotspots in places such as airports and libraries, a computer internet connection was taken to be something that involved a phone line. A somewhat similar trajectory from wired to wireless had been followed 60 years previously by radio broadcasting in West Africa, as outlined by Head (1979: 39–44) and MacKay (1964: 1–5). Short wave radio transmissions were subject to sunspots and other atmospheric disturbances, and so an alternative distribution system known variously as ‘wired wireless’, ‘RDS – Radio Distribution System’ or ‘rediffusion’ was sometimes used to distribute BBC programmes originating in London to the colonies. When Sir Arnold Hodson became Governor of what was then the Gold Coast in 1934 he used experience he had gained developing RDS in the Falkland Islands six years earlier to launch a similar system. Such systems have been in use in many countries – Telefonrundspruch, in Switzerland, for example.3 There were no locally originated programmes, and the quality of the English used in the linking announcements made by local technicians was criticised in 1938 by ‘unofficial’ (i.e. African) members of the Legislative Council. The technicians were soundly defended by Hodson (Head 1979: 43), and in due course locally originated programmes were produced throughout West Africa. Shortly after the Gold Coast became independent as Ghana, a book by Henry Swanzy (1958) appeared. It featured literary contributions in prose and verse to the Ghana Broadcasting System between 1955 and 1957, which are seen by Carrington (1959: 119) in a review of this book, as ‘the first appearance of a Ghanaian national literature.’

It is going too far to attribute Ghanaian literature to the introduction of radio. However, it was that shift from wired, relayed programmes from London to locally produced ones that caused the development in countries such as Nigeria of groups of broadcasters who could eloquently present ideas of a political as well as a literary nature (Mackay 1964: 10; see also Armour (1984) for the later period of 1946–1957 and Wilkinson (1972)). This national radiophonic eloquence was perhaps not entirely the intention of the Earl of Plymouth, who in 1936 had chaired a report into the future of broadcasting in the colonies which mentioned the indirect propaganda value to Britain of broadcasting to the colonies. There was no mention then that the colonies might broadcast back.

In 2004 I gave a talk in Professor Schmied’s seminar at Chemnitz University on a mobile English learning project the BBC had been carrying out in China, and also on the News section of the BBC Learning English website.

3 Telefonrundspruch used to exist in all four linguistic regions of Switzerland and, among many others, also broadcast BBC ELT programmes; it was switched off in 1998.
When setting up the original site in 1996 I had talked with the UK’s educational technology organisation, now known as BeCTA, about the kind of content that might be appropriate for the site. They had pointed out that the BBC was associated with news – and so a section explaining news language was started, called initially ‘Words, Words, Words’, later changing title to ‘Words in the News’. At first it appeared only in hypertext form. When it became possible to put streamed audio on the web we started taking an audio report from a BBC correspondent, selecting words we felt were difficult, providing a written explanation and also the audio of the word in isolation read at both slow and natural speed, with a short pause for repetition. This multimedia approach, using two senses, had proved successful in the past, with language courses including disks, cassettes, CDs or CD-ROMs. The internet made it possible once again, in this case free of charge.

In many ways this was a similar model to the earlier BBC News in Special English, with the same snag of relying on native speaker intuition as to what bits of language might prove difficult and which might be useful to learn. Professor Schmied arranged for part of the seminar to be turned into a feedback session. Sample stories were examined, the language points selected and the explanations given commented on by an audience mainly consisting of students of English. The results showed that while those native speaker intuitions were to quite an extent valid, some items that had not been explained should have been, while the explanation of others was unnecessary; furthermore it appeared necessary to avoid the trap of making the explanation harder than the original item.

This shows two things. First, that technology is changing fast – so broadcasters interested in language need to make decisions about possible future reactions of their audience. Second, that the important underlying questions about language and learning don’t necessarily alter all that much, and centre around understanding and the nature of any explanation provided.

While broadcasters have always encouraged listener and viewer response, sometimes making programmes involving audience feedback, the internet changed the nature of the relationship, since everyone can now be their own publisher. The generic title for this content when used by broadcasters was initially ‘user generated content’; more recently, with the rise of sites such as MySpace and FaceBook, it is termed ‘social networking’. Either way, it can cause headaches for website owners. (There are perhaps some analogies with the change from rediffusion to locally originated broadcasts in Africa.) For the learner, the crucial points are that the language is not moderated and may not come from a native speaker.

In 1997 an email based discussion group on the BBC Learning English website was started, enabling learners to chat (in a moderated, asynchronous way) about topics that interested them. In language learning terms, this was the equivalent in cyber-space of the ‘Language Discussion Circle’ of
earlier days. The news provided the BBC discussion group with some topics for discussion. When international crises occurred, moderation could become hard but BBC guidelines were available for producers involved in moderation, and the group members were self regulating by sticking to discussion of the language involved in reporting events.

Early on, a decision was taken not to correct the language used in the posts, though we sometimes emailed back to members suggesting they rephrase particular points. At one level this was a pragmatic decision: we had neither time nor the resources to correct every post. At another, an ethical decision was involved, despite the fact that it was at first sight incongruous for an English teaching website with the BBC label to carry posts with misspellings and faulty grammar. Changing the way in which non-native speakers express themselves can in some cases alter what they are trying to say. We were neither entirely in the role of teachers (complete with the html equivalent of red pens) nor of desk editors in a publishing house. As it turned out, several group members had a talent responding to pleas for linguistic help (apparent or otherwise) and one of them went on to start a firm teaching languages over the internet.

Most broadcasters will not have exactly this problem of users expecting linguistic feedback. However, there is a massive growth in all forms of user originated content that has not gone through an editorial process, in other words, with reactive moderation, where users complain about the content of particular items rather than active moderation of everything. This may eventually cause problems for both their non-native-speaker audience and indeed for native speaker users not expecting to come across what some would doubtless call ‘rotten English’. Examples of this type of content include ‘World Cup Webcam’. During the 2006 football World Cup in Germany, fans viewing BBC World TV were invited to express their opinions live on television. All they needed was a webcam and a broadband connection. The personal experiences of a worker who had moved to Shanghai added greatly to the authentic tone of a BBC World Service series on emerging industrial giants. And many broadcasters have blogs (weblogs) and sometimes their video equivalent, vlogs (video weblogs), for individual programmes or for particular sections of their audience.

As part of the collaboration with Chemnitz, Professor Schmied arranged for one of his research students, Katrin Uhlig, to come to the BBC and compare, from the perspective of a German speaking linguistics specialist, various strands of news output, including the language used in the coverage of the same story by various international broadcasters. One area of her work was particularly interesting in the light of the growth of user generated content: an analysis of posts by native and non-native speakers to a BBC Message Board dealing with current affairs issues. Her findings shed new light on the length of posts, which were often longer when written by non-
native speakers, who also tended to address the author of the original post or the previous writer in the thread, and to give extended explanations for their opinions. Uhlig also considered register, with the informality of native speakers contrasting with the more formal style adopted by some non-native speaker groups. Whether these differences are due to age, familiarity with electronic communication or prior English language learning experience could not be determined.


In the introduction I mentioned two possible audiences for this paper: learners interested in using news broadcasts (in the widest sense) to maintain or improve their English, and broadcasters themselves. It is the broadcasters who have most to gain from a consideration of news language. Learners can always turn to other types of ‘authentic’ language in the media – sports, music and drama (including soap operas.) From all of these they will gain linguistic and also social insights. News broadcasters, however, are faced with a dilemma. Should they reach out to the growing ‘third circle’ of users who have English as a second or third language? Or should they aim at ‘native speaker’ comprehension? There are various shades in between. Good news writing has many of the characteristics of good writing for learners: clarity, concision and the goal of getting a message – a story – across. Context can be explained, as can extra-linguistic elements. Short interviews where complex language is used can be glossed in the surrounding announcements. On television and the web good visuals – whether photos or graphics – can help clarify complex stories. Style guides can lay down guidelines for journalists. Nonetheless, it is my contention that language remains one of the major controllable barriers to the uptake of broadcast news.

How can this challenge be approached by broadcasters? First, by classifying what they are broadcasting, second, by analysing the language, and third, by changing what is written in such a way as to make it more accessible without oversimplifying it. There has been talk of the ‘dumbing down’ of television. No news organisation wants to be accused of producing ‘Mickey Mouse’ stories. Yet they all wish to increase the number of their listeners, viewers and website users.

There is a further justification for making the news as comprehensible as possible. While access to accurate, impartial information is not as fundamental as the right to freedom, water or food, if societies want to develop, providing opportunities for all their citizens, it is important nevertheless. The 1945 constitution of UNESCO mandated it to ‘promote the free flow of ideas by word and image’. (Hargreaves and Thomas 2002) It is within this context that I propose the compilation of an international corpus of news English. (Obvi-
ously I would hope that similar ones could be established for other languages.) Without an accurate analysis of what is actually happening across the media and across broadcasting organisations one cannot even hope to start defining what news English is.

Documenting and investigating current developments in the language of news broadcasting by means of a corpus is in theory quite feasible if funding and policy problems can be overcome. Successful international cooperation has produced corpora designed for the study of regional variability in standard Englishes worldwide (ICE – the International Corpus of English) or the comparative study of learner English produced by students of diverse L1 background (ICLE – the International Corpus of Learner English). What has hampered the development of some corpora is access to a sufficient quantity of language. Broadcasters can supply this with no problem. In fact, one of the first problems in such a venture would actually be where to start the compilation, given the vast amount of possible data to include.

As an example of one kind of phenomenon which I regard as particularly promising for detailed study, consider the treatment of the same material in different ways tracing for example the linguistic progress of an unedited audio interview through different stages:

- after basic editing (involving non-editorial functions such as removing some hesitations, repetitions and false starts)
- as broadcast on radio (after editorial intervention, such as altering the order of questions and shortening or omitting some answers)
- as used in a news summary (language which is written to be spoken)
- transferred to a web page, with appropriate accompanying image
- transferred to a mobile platform, where concision is important.

(adapted from the original print model in Bell 1991: 33–55)

Other subsets of data meriting closer scrutiny could include the language used in various events as categorised by Volkmer (1999: 190), already quoted and discussed in Section 2 above. They could provide a basis for research and indeed publication – for instance an updated version of the minimal language used by VOA Special English – possibly influenced by ideas from the concept of English as an International Language. Traditional subsets such as financial, business and political English would also yield linguistic information.

However, though practical linguistically, problems of a financial and policy nature abound. Few broadcasters would be happy to allow uncontrolled access to their content. Editorial misjudgements – not to mention typographical errors – would be displayed to all. One solution might be for groups of broadcasters to pool a sample of their output. As we found with the **BBC English Dictionary**, broadcasters can easily provide statistically representative samples. English language broadcasters within the European Broadcasting Union, the Asian Broadcasting Union, the Arab states Broadcasting
Union and the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association could be approached. Perhaps the most interesting international broadcaster to emerge in recent years is Al-Jazeera. With its main production centres in London, Dubai and Kuala Lumpur, those heard on it would probably provide an interesting cross-section of English across the globe.

I will end with one further suggestion for research on radio and television broadcasts – the human voice. The quality of the language used by a station is important, but so too is the voice of the individual newsreader or presenter – and this is far harder to evaluate. There may be a high degree of agreement about who does – or does not – have ‘a good voice for broadcasting’. But few will be able to analyse what exactly is meant by that phrase. Musicians have been faced with similar questions about musical performance. In 1990 George Pratt (Pratt 1990) deconstructed the aural training of musicians, which concentrated traditionally on two main factors, pitch and rhythm. He argued that other elements of a more abstract and qualitative nature were also important and could be taught – elements such as timbre, texture and density, compass, range and tessitura, and dynamics and articulation. Developing and applying a corresponding range of elements to the voices of broadcasters might not lead to the discovery of the ideal newsreader but it could provide hope to those aspiring to become one.4

9. References


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The English of Broadcast News


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