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English in the World

1.1 Introduction

The title of this book is purposely ambiguous and invites questions: what is the current location of English? Is the relocation of English taking place? If so, where, how and why is it being relocated? This first chapter introduces the main themes of the book and sets in motion a discussion that will consider various aspects of the notion (re-)location. In the simplest and most intuitive sense of the word, the location of English could be taken as being England, in the same way as the location of Italian may be Italy and the location of Japanese Japan. This morphological similarity often includes the names of nations and makes the country–nation–language association almost a genealogical one: it seems to be in the natural order of things that Thai is the language of the Thai people and of Thailand, that German is the language of the German people and of Germany and so on. However, the correspondence between language, nation and territory is always a construct (see Chapter 2), and many languages have gone beyond it, their diffusion reaching larger areas than that of a single territory. The language that has done so in the most spectacular way is English, which, in the course of the last four centuries, has stretched well beyond England, to become the world’s largest lingua franca.

Accordingly, it is common to hear and read that English is a ‘global language’ (Crystal, 1997/2003) or a ‘world language’. In a purely physical sense, what these expressions mean is that English has some presence in nearly every country in the world. From this point of view, English is unique, in that no other language is currently so widespread. Other international languages such as Arabic and Spanish tend to be spoken in specific geographical areas, while the use of French is in decline in
many former French colonies (e.g. in what used to be called Indochina). English, therefore, is the only international language without precise geographical boundaries or clear coordinates. In itself, this constitutes an unprecedented form of relocation of a language out of its original home, at least from a physical point of view. This book takes this as an obvious starting point for a discussion that will embrace other aspects of the notion relocation.

1.2 Changing the conceptualisation of English

Despite its enormous proportions, the spread of English in the world has not taken place in the same way and with the same effects everywhere, and the presence of English is very uneven. The adjective ‘global’, in this sense, may be an exaggeration. There are parts of the world where English is the only language spoken by the majority of people (e.g. rural England), territories where it is an unknown language (e.g. rural China), while in most cases it is part of the linguistic ecology of diverse and multilingual communities (e.g. urban Malaysia). This lack of uniformity makes the task of drawing a map of English in the world very challenging. There is no single method of scrutiny that would produce satisfactory results. Even apparently objective data of the most basic type, namely, to consider whether or not English is an official language, will not even begin to shed any useful light. In the United States, for example, English is not an official language at the federal level, while it has official status in many former British colonies in Africa and Asia.

The status, the forms and the functions of English in the world (from now on, EIW) constitute an area which has attracted a growing amount of interest in the last 40 years, especially since the 1970s. Within this area, there have been two interrelated focal points: (a) the affirmation of English as the language of global currency, and (b) the many varieties of English that emerged as a result of British imperialism. By and large, the study of EIW has been approached from one or both of the two perspectives. Scholars like David Crystal (1997/2003) and David Graddol (1997, 2006), for example, have produced important publications which are general accounts on the history (including hypotheses about the future) and geography of English in the world. Others, like Peter Trudgill and Manfred Görlach, have devoted their attention to the identification and the description of the linguistic features that distinguish the range of varieties of English worldwide (see Trudgill and Hanna, 1982; Görlach, 1991, 1995, 1998, 2002; Trudgill, 2004). These studies are predominantly descriptive in nature and tend to focus on English as a code.