

(World) Englishes as Complex Systems
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Linguistic theory, our notions of "how language works", has increasingly moved from frameworks highlighting homogeneity and categorial distinctions (generativism, structuralism) to concepts recognizing variability, gradience and evolutionary processes (variationism, usage-based linguistics, construction grammar). Extrapolating from this line of thinking, I advocate the theory of Complex Systems (CS), also known as Complex Dynamic or Adaptive Systems, as a suitable conceptualization of language. More specifically, I claim that this theory can be fruitfully applied to the evolution of varieties of English.

CS theory, with chaos theory as a closely related approach, has been developed and become influential in the sciences in recent decades. I briefly survey its scientific background and some core properties of such systems, and outline earlier considerations on its suitability for language (in work by Larsen-Freeman, Ellis, Bybee, and Kretzschmar, for instance). In the main part of the presentation I discuss some examples of how CS principles manifest themselves in evolutionary processes in the history and in varieties of English, embracing diachrony and synchrony as well as contact varieties. For example, changes in the relative pronoun system over time illustrate system-ness and increasing complexification; long-term processes in the verb morphology of English show the oscillation between order and chaos in sub-systems; an increase of polarity-based marking of auxiliaries in British dialects exemplifies auto-organization; and polysemy diffusion in New Englishes can be accounted for as indicative of perpetual dynamism and the possible emergence of qualitative change.

These exemplary applications show that between all varieties of English there are mutual overlaps and interrelations, but there are also ongoing divergence and local innovations through internal developments or contact effects. In principle evolution proceeds incrementally, though there is also a (rare) potential for qualitative leaps. Arguing against polity-based concepts of "language vs. dialects" or ideologically inspired claims that contact varieties (e.g. creoles) are genetically unrelated to their donor languages (Thomason & Kaufman 1988), ultimately my core claim is that all varieties of English, including diachronic, dialectal or contact-induced ones, e.g. Old English just like Indian English or Nigerian Pidgin, are manifestations of a single overarching CS of Englishes, meandering through time and space.