

The global spread of English is leading to unforeseen — and, for many mother-tongue speakers, unwelcome — outcomes. For example, two years ago, Korean Airlines reportedly chose a French company to supply its flight simulators, in part because its English was more comprehensible than that of a UK rival. Increasingly, it seems that non-mother-tongue speakers of English are realising that conversation in the language tends to flow more easily and intelligibly when few or no mother-tongue speakers are present.

In other words, where English is used as a lingua franca native speakers are often the problem and non-native speakers the solution. Nevertheless, the opposite scenario is still widely assumed to be true.

The “deficiency by default” perspective on non-mother-tongue English is common even among linguistics experts. For instance, eminent British academic Roy Harris wrote in *The Times Higher* in March that the English of non-mother-tongue speakers was “a hotch-potch in which it does not matter how the words are spelt, whether or not singulars are distinguished from plurals, and which syllables are stressed in speech and which are not”. The equally eminent German scholar Manfred Görlach similarly described “broken, deficient forms” of English that reflect “incomplete acquisition”.

Harris, Görlach and the countless others who share their mind-set claim, in effect, that any feature of English that differs from a particular native standard variety is an error. According to this view, adjustments to the “correct” forms can be acceptable only if sanctioned by mother-tongue use. Hence, they would argue, the plural “accommodations” can now be accepted because it has been adopted in the UK and the US, whereas the plural “informations” remains an error because it has not. The possibility that the English spoken by non-mother-tongue speakers may be

# Lashed by the mother tongue

Smug native speakers of English could find themselves left behind in a world that uses it as a lingua franca, says **Jennifer Jenkins**

both proficient and different from that of native speakers is dismissed out of hand.

Thus, despite the fact that the vast majority of the world’s English speakers speak it as a lingua franca it is seen as the prerogative of the minority who speak it as a native language to decide its international forms. This is patently absurd.

It becomes all the more untenable in light of research findings demonstrating that the use of native English idioms and some pronunciation features more often hinder than facilitate successful communication in lingua franca contexts. The entrenched attitudes of those who dismiss

such work as an exercise in political correctness prevent them from embracing change and cause them to cling to the belief that only mother-tongue speakers from England (and now also North America) may determine its norms. This ignores the many changes that non-mother-tongue speakers have wrought on the language through linguistic contact and influence down the centuries, which for some reason are not seen as appropriate to modern English.

In our universities, there are those who agree with Harris that the English of non-mother-tongue students is “appalling”.



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And it is becoming increasingly common to hear native British students complain they cannot understand their non-mother-tongue international lecturers. The solution is invariably said to be pronunciation classes to correct the supposed deficiencies of these non-native accents.

On the other hand, it could be argued that in these days of globalization, with English being used extensively as an academic lingua franca, those students are fortunate to have exposure to the kinds of English varieties that they are likely to meet later on in their working lives.

It could also be argued that we mother-tongue university lecturers, rather than our non-mother-tongue students, should make most of the adjustments. We need to be able to make ourselves understood by and understand students from a wide range of first-language backgrounds but we are notoriously bad at both. Instead, we fall back on the argument that students’ “appalling” English skills rather than our poor accommodation skills are to blame and ignore the fact that most of us do not speak an English that is internationally understood.

In July, an article in *The Times Higher*, bemoaning the fact that the British are poor at learning languages, was illustrated with a cartoon depicting the seven deadly sins. Pride is saying “I’m British, why learn Spanish?” This same ethnocentric attitude is responsible for the position that many hold in respect of English as a lingua franca: “I speak British English, why learn to understand Spanish English or to be understood by Spanish speakers of English?” And it is this same attitude that led Korean Airlines to decide to deal with a French, not a British, company.

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## Grant contest proves an ill-conceived lottery

European Research Council’s attempt to identify innovative young scientists fails on all counts, says **Christian Fleck**

Last month, 8,608 young researchers received an e-mail informing them that they had not won in a European lottery. The prizes on offer were high — up to €400,000 (£272,000) — but the cost of losing was also high.

Each of the 8,608 researchers had sent in a substantial research proposal in order to secure the new “starting grant” of the recently established European Research Council. The final rejection rate has now emerged as 97 per cent of applicants, much higher than in other scientific competitions. This will disturb and discourage the losers and send out the wrong message to the would-be European Research Area.

The ERC is the youngest European research funding body, run by a scientific council of 22 distinguished scientists, including two Nobel laureates, and is independent of the European Commission’s bureaucracy

and member states’ politicians. Its first programme tried to identify the best young researchers of “scientific excellence” engaged in “cutting-edge investigation” at “frontier research”. But the resulting “starting grant” scheme will do more harm than good. The selection procedures have been ill-designed and are not fit to reach the goal of supporting scientific excellence.

The competition was open to young scientists from every corner of the wider Europe who had finished their PhD between two and nine years earlier. Such candidates were invited to submit research proposals for peer review. On April 25, the closing date of the competition, the ERC had received 9,167 proposals.

In the first round, the ERC rejected all but 559 applicants. The survivors were invited to expand their proposals within a matter of weeks. Ultimately, only about 250 will win. There is no way to

see fair play because the 800 evaluators have already rebuffed too many promising applicants.

Furthermore, the evaluators lack the means for fair play for several reasons. By the very nature of being young, the applicants’ potential cannot be determined rationally. Usually, PhD theses are written in the author’s native language; most panellists might not even be able to understand the applicant’s title.

The main criterion is the scientific value of the proposed research. It is always hard to evaluate plans, hence most evaluators turn to background information to make sense of a particular proposal. Obviously young researchers cannot accumulate much reputation of their own. For this reason, the evaluators had to look for other signs of excellence. One could be sure that they evaluated a proposal from an affiliate of a highly esteemed colleague much more

favourably than one sent in from a no-name place by a disciple of an unfamiliar mentor. The notorious Matthew effect, by which eminent scientists get more credit than comparatively unknown researchers for similar work, must have been in evidence. This mechanism might be acceptable in rivalry between senior scholars, but it produces great injustice in the case of youngsters, especially in a highly fragmented Europe.

It is highly dubious that the ERC panellists can detect the most promising researchers. Scholars might know which institutions are the best in their field, but there is no assurance that the younger people there are also the best.

I bear no malice towards the ERC’s scientific board members and its 800 assistants by predicting that the 250-odd winners of the present competition will not be selected because of their indi-

vidual creativity and willingness to break new ground but will be affiliates of well-known senior researchers or connected to the most prominent universities.

It might be that the highest-ranking universities assemble many of the brightest minds, but there is no indication that the distribution of promising young women and men correlates with any of the established rankings. Starting scientists of high potential may be scattered much more evenly throughout Europe.

A tremendous amount of work-time has been wasted by those participating in the first stage of the process alone. I calculate that at least 9,000-person months on the side of the proposal-writing young scientists and about 100 weeks’ work-time of Europe’s best and most creative senior researchers have been expended. No doubt the well-meaning members of the ERC’s scientific board will argue

that they could not have foreseen the high number of proposals. But they should have at least considered the possibility.

One cannot but blame the ERC for not thinking ahead. A Green Paper published in April by the European Commission on the perspectives of the European Research Area complains about the fragmentation of the European scientific and research landscape, the lack of a common labour market for academics, their immobility, and so on.

To build a new scheme on such a bumpy foundation has little chance of success because crucial preconditions for peer review — such as fairness and evenly distributed knowledge about the scholarly field at large — do not exist.

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