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L.A. Hill’s ‘neutral English’ – a historical counterpoint to ELF

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The concept of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is the subject of much theoretical discussion and debate within ELT. However, little has been written concerning the history of ideas preceding it. This article discusses the concept of ‘neutral English’ proposed in 1967 by the writer L.A. Hill. After summarizing Hill’s life and work, the article explores his idea for neutral English, noting its apparent similarities to modern ELF theory as well as the historical and contextual factors which distinguish it. Using Hill’s work and stated motivations as a lens through which to view modern theory, the article highlights the possibility that apparently radical ideas can be co-opted to ‘centre’ interests in modern global ELT. Finally, it is proposed that more work into the history of conceptualizations of international English use would shed further light on the academic and political forces which intersect with this area of research.

Introduction

Within ELT, increasing attention is being paid to the concept of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), which Mauranen (2018: 8) defines as ‘a contact language between speakers or speaker groups when at least one of them uses it as a second language’. Rather than assessing the ‘correctness’ of international English use against standard native speaker varieties, ELF focuses on language use during interaction between speakers from different backgrounds. While early research on ELF attempted to discover core features of international English use, this has recently given way to more of a focus on the processes used by speakers to achieve successful communication, with greater emphasis on the multilingual repertoires of speakers (cf. Jenkins 2015).

While ELF is a topic of much discussion and scholarly work today, relatively little has been written about the historical background to research in this area. For Howatt and Widdowson (2004: 361), ELF research is a recent trend, with no attention being
devoted to historical precursors, while only Seidlohofer (2011) and more recently Widdowson (2017) have considered previous phenomena like C. K. Ogden’s (1930) Basic English in relation to ELF. Looking at the past, though, can provide perspectives which shed new light on current developments and phenomena, and can raise critical questions.

This article will, then, place present-day conceptions of ELF in historical perspective, focusing specifically on the idea of ‘neutral English’ proposed in a 1967 paper by the materials writer and language teaching theorist L.A. Hill, a notion which, as we shall see, was much closer than Basic English to the modern conception of ELF. While we do not claim any direct heritage from neutral English and acknowledge that ELF researchers do not argue that ELF is ‘neutral’, we wish to indicate how ELF research might fit into a broader history of ideas in ELT and show how this can provide a new perspective on current discussions. We first provide some biographical information about L.A. Hill himself, to outline the circumstances in which his neutral English proposal was created. Following this, we briefly summarize his paper and identify its key points as a basis for an initial comparison with ELF. We then situate his argument within the wider sociopolitical and methodological context of post-colonial ELT, moving into a more nuanced discussion of ways in which Hill’s proposal both presaged and suggests critical questions regarding ELF.

**L.A. Hill: A Biographical Sketch**

Leslie Alexander Hill (1918–2008) was a British English language teacher and teaching theorist, born in Greece, who was particularly active as an ELT author from the 1950s until the 1970s. Published biographical information on L.A. Hill is sparse, and this brief account of his life and work has been pieced together largely from the preface to Hill 1967b, from occasional references in his articles, and from an autobiographical audio-recording he made in 1981 (We have made this available, along with a transcript, here: [https://warwick.ac.uk/elt_archive/halloffame/hill](https://warwick.ac.uk/elt_archive/halloffame/hill)).

Hill was educated at the University of Cambridge and began to teach English as a foreign language in 1939 in Greece. After the war, in 1947, he obtained a British Council post as teacher and teacher trainer in Iran. He subsequently moved to Indonesia as a British Council lecturer and Education Officer and in 1954 he was appointed Professor of
English at the University of Indonesia, acting as head of the Department of English. Phillipson (1992) has highlighted the relative lack of qualifications of early British Council ELT experts and it is notable that Hill was required to return to England to take a BA specifically in English, which he obtained at the Institute of Education, University of London, before being confirmed in post as Professor. On the way back to Indonesia he took part in the August 1953 UNESCO International Seminar in Sri Lanka on the Contribution of the Teaching of Modern Languages towards Education for Living in a World Community.

Hill subsequently worked as the British Council’s Chief Education Officer in India from 1958 to 1960 before resigning from the Council in 1961 to become a full-time author and lecturer. He went on to publish a number of texts for learners of English, including his best-selling Stories for Reproduction series for elementary, intermediate and advanced learners (OUP, 1965), and (with M. Dobbyn) A Teacher Training Course for Teachers of EFL (Cassell, 1979).

It was in 1955, soon after becoming Professor and Head of Department in Indonesia, that Hill began researching and writing about language teaching, regularly publishing both articles and letters in English Language Teaching (Journal) between the mid-1950s and the late 1970s. Smith (2005: liv) notes that between 1957 and 1961 Hill was, with the better-known language teaching theorist Michael West, the most prolific author in the journal, with each publishing a total of eight articles during this period. Hill’s contributions covered diverse topics including the teaching of English in India, teacher training, technology in language teaching, and language teaching methodology. In 1967, Oxford University Press honoured him with a compilation, Selected Articles on the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (Hill 1967b), which brought together 17 of the more than 50 articles he had published between 1955 and 1967.

‘Neutral English’

Just one of the articles in this compilation had not been previously published – this was ‘Neutral English’, first drafted in 1956, when Hill was in Indonesia. In this short paper, Hill advances original arguments for the identification and teaching of a neutral form of English for international communication which shares some notable similarities to the early conception of ELF.
Hill begins by noting that ‘there is a tendency among many teachers of English abroad [...] to assume that English is studied chiefly as a means of becoming acquainted with the life, literature, and institutions of the English-speaking peoples’ (p. 90). In support of this, Hill refers to the 1953 UNESCO Seminar, at which European delegates had ‘stressed the importance of a foreign language as a gateway to the culture of the native speakers of that language’ (ibid.). However, he also notes that at the same conference ‘there was a tendency for the Asian delegates to stress the importance of English as a gateway to mutual understanding and co-operation among many countries’. Hill terms these two opposing views ‘unilateral’ and ‘multilateral’, respectively. Drawing on his experiences in Asia, Hill notes that the multilateral perspective was establishing itself in this part of the world, referencing a 1954 statement from an Indonesian Ministry of Education official, who stated that English was being taught ‘in the country’s own interests as a tool for international understanding’ and was ‘a gateway to Japan, India, Egypt, and many other countries’ (p. 91). Indonesia had achieved independence from the Netherlands in 1949, and these sentiments clearly reflect new post-Independence thinking about the goals of ELT. Indeed, Hill notes that this trend was also prevalent in other newly independent nations such as India. In light of this, Hill suggests three possible paths for language teaching to take: path (a) in which ‘we can try to insist on their learning English in the ways that we ourselves want’; path (b) in which ‘we can withdraw and leave the teaching to others’; or path (c) in which ‘we can adapt ourselves to their desires, even if they wish to learn English for different purposes, and in different ways, from those we may want’ (pp. 91–92). Clearly, by ‘we’ here, Hill is referring to teachers/agencies from the Anglophone West (thus indicating Hill’s assumed readership), whereas ‘they’ refers to citizens of Asian countries.

Hill rejects path (a) on the grounds that ‘if we attach to English language teaching strings which can be interpreted, however unjustly, as examples of “linguistic imperialism”, we risk the danger of its enemies forcing the abandonment of language teaching lock, stock, and barrel’ (p. 92). This passage is notable for its use of the phrase ‘linguistic imperialism’, 36 years before Robert Phillipson (1992) popularized the term.

He similarly rejects path (b), noting that taking such a path ‘will only mean that others will step in to take our place’ (p. 92). This reveals further motivations behind Hill’s proposal which will be explored later, however it is worth noting at this point the somewhat sinister reference to ‘others’, which might indicate concerns about the Cold
War and the rise of Soviet influence in the ‘Third World’ and/or perhaps even concerns about American interests replacing those of Britain.

Path (c) is the one Hill recommends. He notes that taking such a path will mean that ‘we’ must ‘strip our language-teaching to its bare scientific essentials before rebuilding it in ways that will be acceptable to a country that wants English primarily as a vehicle for international communication’ (p. 92). He argues that this would not preclude learners from exploring British or American culture, but that those who do not wish to do so ‘will be in a position to use their knowledge of the language to further international understanding’ (ibid.). In other words, Hill frames his neutral English as a tool for those whose desire is international communication, while also providing a grounding for students who wish to specialize in the literature or cultures of Inner Circle countries.

Hill goes on to discuss regional standards of English, acknowledging the claims of, for example, Indian English, and at the same time arguing that the concepts of regional standards and neutral English are complementary rather than contradictory. ‘A Regional Standard’, he says, ‘becomes acceptable for international communication when it becomes neutral English, i.e. when it divests itself of those particular local peculiarities that hamper international communication’ (p. 93). Although he does not say this explicitly, it seems that Hill considers it to be as necessary for speakers of, say, ‘standard Southern English’ or ‘standard American English’ as for speakers of Indian English to modify their speech for purposes of international communication.

Having set up this theoretical model, Hill moves on to discuss practical classroom implications, focusing mainly on pronunciation. Here, he suggests adopting limited pronunciation goals that lead to mutual intelligibility, arguing – in terms that seem to prefigure Jenkins’ (2000) work on identification of a ‘lingua franca core’ by more than forty years – that ‘we must find out the points that interfere with international intelligibility in the speech-community in which we are working, and work out intensive drills to overcome these obstacles one by one’ (pp. 93–94).

Hill summarizes his argument by stating that ‘we should lend a sympathetic ear to the desires and aspirations of the many [...] who see in English the answer to their need for an international lingua franca, provided it is taught in a truly international way, and not tied to any particular regional literature, institutions, or way of life’ (p. 95).
Neutral English and ELF: surface similarities

Hill's neutral English proposal predates modern studies of English as a Lingua Franca by several decades, and yet evidences some remarkable similarities to early work on ELF, in particular. This section will draw out some of these similarities and show how Hill's neutral English can be seen as an unrecognized theoretical forerunner of ELF.

Perhaps the most obvious similarity is the detachment of English from its cultural and linguistic roots in the Anglophone West. Modern ELF research, in a general sense, has a very similar goal. It is commonly stated in ELF literature that the number of L2 English users far outweighs that of L1 users, and thus judging lingua franca English use against the standards of British or American English is misguided (see Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2011). As Jenkins (2000: 160) says, there is a need for English speakers of all backgrounds to ‘move their receptive goal posts and adjust their expectations as far as international (but not intranational) uses of English are concerned’. This seems similar to Hill's argument for an ‘international lingua franca’ that is ‘not tied to any regional literature, institutions, or way of life’ (p. 95).

A second similarity is the emphasis placed on empirical description rather than artificial prescription in the identification and selection of language features. Hill was by no means the first to propose ideas for an international language (or even an international English). However, what previous attempts to create an international language had had in common was their artificiality (a point emphasized also by Widdowson 2017: 104). Hill’s focus on empirical investigation distinguishes his proposal from earlier notions (including Basic English) and aligns it more closely with work on ELF.

The final and perhaps most striking similarity between neutral English and early work on ELF is its specific focus on features of phonology which facilitate or impede communication, as in Jenkins’ (2000) identification of the most salient features of English for international communication (her 'lingua franca core'). Jenkins (2000: 160) states that ‘there is really no justification for doggedly persisting in referring to an item as “an error” if the vast majority of the world’s L2 speakers produce and understand it’, and this seems to echo quite directly the practical suggestions made by Hill regarding the teaching of neutral English.

It needs to be emphasized that research into ELF has moved on considerably since
Jenkins’ early work on the topic. Indeed, she has recently commented that, while ‘[T]he original orientation to ELF communication focused heavily, if not exclusively, on form’, this later gave way ‘to an understanding that it is the processes underlying these forms that are paramount, and hence to a focus on ELF users and ELF as social practice’ (Jenkins, 2015: 49) (see also Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011 for a review of recent research trends). However, while it would be incorrect to say that Hill’s work is completely analogous to modern conceptions of ELF, it is clear that neutral English can be situated on a developmental trajectory towards present-day work.

**A wider perspective: the geopolitics of ‘neutral English’**

We have shown that neutral English stands out for its closeness, in some respects, to the notion of ELF. However, we are not claiming any direct influence. Hill’s proposal had no obvious impact at the time and has hardly been cited since (though see Kiczkowiak and Lowe, 2018: 8–9); indeed, it was very much of its time, as we shall now discuss. Our claim in this article is that examining historical precursors can provide a new perspective on current debates, but anachronism needs to be avoided for this to be of any value – in other words, contextual differences need to be taken fully into account.

This brings us to the socio-political context in which Hill developed his original (1956) proposal for neutral English. Anti-colonialism was a dominant leitmotiv in prevailing political discourse in both of the contexts where Hill worked during the 1950s – Indonesia (independent since 1949) and India (which had gained its independence from the UK in 1947). Both the Soviet Union and the USA were seeking to increase their influence in these countries, indeed throughout what was becoming known as the ‘Third World’, a term coined in the early 1950s to describe (mainly) newly independent countries that were unaligned with either the NATO countries (the ‘First World) or the Soviet bloc (the ‘Second World’) during the Cold War. *Neutrality*, in the sense of non-alignment with these two blocs, was deliberately being sought out by leaders of newly independent countries – the ‘Non-aligned Movement’ was formalized, indeed, in 1956, with the leaders of India and, increasingly, Indonesia playing important roles.

With anti-imperialist feeling seemingly on the rise in both countries and with bonds being broken between Britain and its colonies (both Ghana and Malaya were to become independent in 1957, the year after Hill’s article was originally drafted), neutrality of
newly independent countries – in the sense of non-alignment with the Soviet bloc and retention of some ties with the ‘imperialist’ west – was a limited goal which seemed very desirable to British Council officers like Hill. Rivalries with the Soviet Union, especially, but also with allies such as the USA and France were played out in the arena of ‘soft power’ in which language teaching was a major arm, as much as in other, more clearly political areas.

‘Neutral English’ should therefore be seen in the context of Britain seeking new, less culturally imperialistic links with former colonies, in a Cold War context. Indeed, as Smith (2005) has shown, British ELT orthodoxy of the 1950s–1960s can be viewed overall in this light, with its focus on language as opposed to literature (the latter being associated in colonial contexts with inappropriate impositions of British culture), on instrumental goals, and on the promotion of scientific- and neutral-seeming approaches including structural syllabuses and situational methods. C.K. Ogden’s (1930) Basic English (based on a vocabulary of 850 words with a few grammatical rules) had already been proposed in the pre-war years as a tool for promoting clear thinking, and as a mode of relatively neutral international communication. However, Basic English had itself become co-opted to ‘soft power’: with Winston Churchill’s explicit support, it was promoted officially by the British Council in the wartime and immediate post-war years, and this formed another part of the context for the development of Hill’s own ideas.

Against this background, contradictions which seem apparent in Hill’s account of his motivations can be better understood. On the one hand, he appears to be advocating neutral English as a benefit to those who wish to learn English for international communication, while on the other hand this seems a tactical move to uphold the dominance of ‘centre’ interests in the field of English language teaching. Thus, he states that ‘we should lend a sympathetic ear to the desires and aspirations of the many […] who see in English the answer to their need for an international lingua franca’ (p. 95), seeming to imply it is for the benefit of these groups of people that neutral English must be developed. However, he also frames the advantages of neutral English using terms such as ‘we’, ‘our’ and ‘their’, as in the following quotes (emphasis added): ‘we can adapt ourselves to their desires’, ‘others will step in to take our place’, ‘we need to make ourselves primarily linguistic specialists’, ‘we can insist on their learning English in the ways that we ourselves want’ (pp. 91–92). As noted above, Hill is clearly here talking to a presumed readership of fellow British Council employees and/or teachers from Inner
Circle countries, and his recommendations for adopting neutral English seem to be as much concerned with preserving the dominance of British expertise in ELT as with the emancipation of international users of English. Indeed, in the final sentence of his paper he declares that ‘if, however, we demand, in return for our help, that all these tens of millions should take their English with a strong dose of British, or American, or Australian culture, I am afraid that we may kill, or at least seriously maim, the goose that lays the golden eggs’ (p. 95).

Thus, Hill’s arguments for neutral English were at least partially connected with a desire to maintain British influence in English language education. However progressive and similar to ELF Hill’s proposal may seem on the surface, these apparently cynical motivations can be seen to clash with the goals of modern ELF research. Hill regarded English as a ‘goose that lays golden eggs’, and his key stated motivation for developing neutral English was to keep the ‘golden eggs’ coming for teachers and institutions of the Inner Circle, or, rather, the ‘centre’, to adopt Phillipson’s (1992) terminology. Thus, despite the apparent similarities between Hill’s neutral English and modern ELF scholarship, the priorities which motivate the two seem to conflict, reflecting the different historical landscapes in which the ideas emerged. Having said this, Hill does show a level of concern for the needs of students above a simple wish to maintain dominance in the ELT world, and his work signals a growing awareness among English language teaching theorists from the middle of the 20th century onwards with regard to the legitimate diversity of worldwide English use.

**Conclusion**

Recognition of the international use of English is a much-discussed theme in current ELT literature, and discussions of concepts such as native-speakerism and ELF take the global diversification of English use as a starting point. However, it is important to recognize that these ideas are not completely new, and that discussions of similar topics go back further in the history of English language teaching than might be assumed. Recognizing precursors like, in this case, L. A. Hill’s neutral English is important as this can provide new perspectives on the evolution of applied linguistic ideas and on the development of the field as a whole. This article has suggested that neutral English needs to be seen within the context of a body of work, or a tradition, involving Britain coming to terms with loss of Empire and seeking continued relevance via the neutral-seeming enterprises of ELT and applied linguistics. More research would be needed to
indicate ways in which ELF may or may not have developed out of this tradition, and we are not claiming this kind of lineage for ELF here. However, our identification of neutral English as a forerunner does seem to highlight the need for criticality and reflexivity when the implications of ELF or other apparently radical ideas are considered for ELT. Underlying Hill’s neutral English conception, to some extent, was an agenda according to which it was seen as a way to maintain a role for western expertise. Might there not, be a danger of ELF being co-opted by commercial or political interests in a similar way? This is, at least, a question worth asking.

Work on ELF has brought a deeper level of understanding of the ways in which English interactions are carried out globally that is entirely absent from Hill’s rudimentary conception of neutral English. However, neglecting historical forerunners of current concepts and discussions runs the risk of creating false or incomplete narratives in which these ideas spring up in the modern age with little in the way of historical development. It seems, on the basis of the findings presented in this article that there is further work to be done in the area of historical research regarding models of English in ELT, and the theorizing of ELF. Such work may enable us to see that recognition of the validity of varieties or uses of English other than ‘Inner Circle’ ones does not necessarily equate to a relaxation of control by ‘centre’ interests – indeed, Hill’s article shows clearly how the opposite can be the case. Basic English had already been co-opted (under Winston Churchill) as an instrument of soft power to maintain the influence of the ‘English-speaking nations’ in the wartime and immediate post-war years. Hill criticised the artificiality of Basic but – despite its relatively empirical basis – his own neutral English was intended from the outset, more clearly than Basic, to prop up ‘centre’ interests. Ultimately, then, it is perhaps not only the merits of proposals on their own ‘surface’ terms that ELT practitioners and applied linguists should be concerned about but the underlying interests they are used to serve. Although ELF scholarship is far from having these kinds of political goals, proponents of apparently decentred ideas should at least be aware of the way central political or commercial interests can co-opt radical proposals. Seeing that there are historical antecedents to current research does not devalue it but enables us to see it in a new perspective, and promotes constructive critique, which is always necessary when new ideas are introduced into the ELT world.
References


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1 Indeed, the tone of the article suggests – though this cannot be easily proven – that it was drafted in 1956 as
2 While the terms ‘centre’ ‘and ‘Inner Circle’ are often equated in critical writings on ELT, the case of neutral English shows clearly that centre interests can uphold ‘non-inner-circle’ norms. Conversely, inner-circle norms can probably be – indeed, may often seem to be – upheld by periphery ‘players’ in their own interests.