

Third in the pecking order?

Is a new world order of English emerging? Nothing as crude or cruel as a century ago when what Henry Cecil Wyld called the 'Received Standard' of southern England held the imperial high ground, supported by 'Modified Standards' in the regions and the colonies – above a mass of 'broad' rustic dialects, 'debased' urban patois, and 'corrupt' tropical pidgins.

An incipient twenty-first century hierarchy would be quite different. For example, population, economy, technology, and the media put the United States first these days, the United Kingdom second – a very different situation from 1896. Wyld's 'Received Standard' and 'Modified Standard' are not only seldom referred to now, but few students of English have ever heard of them.

In such a brave new world, though, what territory might come third?

India is huge, but the status and nature of its English are still being worked out, and nobody knows how many Indians use it comfortably – twenty, thirty, forty million? Some sources report that the Indian middle class now numbers 100 million out of a population of over 800 million – and certainly that class (as Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas ruefully point out in this issue) aspires to a full command of English and everything that goes with it.

Canada is possible, yet a quarter of its people are Francophone, and Canadians still find it hard to decide where they are linguistically, especially in terms of the historical influence of Britain and the geographical dominance of America.

The third place appears to lie elsewhere, in the recent striking emergence of Australia. Not only have its movies and soaps gone round the world, and not only does it have a burgeoning EFL industry, but its universities and publishers have now produced a range of prestigious, indigenous dictionaries and usage manuals. Once upon a time the phrase 'Australian style' might have been regarded as oxymoronic – but no more, as Pam Peters, Arthur Delbridge, and Colin Yallop make clear in the first two articles in this issue.

In addition, alone among Anglophone territories Australia holds an annual Style Council, to discuss its standard usage. What if one day the whole world of English copied that idea?

Tom McArthur

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English Today (ISSN 0266-0784) is a quarterly.

Publisher: Cambridge University Press, Edinburgh Building, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 2RU. Telephone (01223) 312393

Email: English_Today@cup.cam.ac.uk

Subscriptions: the current annual subscription price for four issues for libraries and institutions is £51 outside North America; £26 for individuals; £20 for students and the retired; airmail £11 per year extra.

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USA, CANADA AND MEXICO:

Publisher: Cambridge University Press, 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211. Telephone (212) 924 3900.

Subscriptions: the current annual subscription price in USA, Canada and Mexico for libraries and institutions is \$81; \$41 for individuals; \$29 for students and the retired. Copies are air-freighted to New York to arrive with minimum delay. Apply to Joseph D. Hranek at the above address.

Advertising Sales: write to the Advertising Coordinator at the above address.

Second class postage paid at New York, NY and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: send address changes in USA, Canada and Mexico to *English Today*, Cambridge University Press, 110 Midland Avenue, Port Chester, New York, NY 10573-4930.

Japanese prices for institutions (including ASP delivery) are available from Kinokuniya Company Ltd, P.O. Box 55, Chitose, Tokyo 156, Japan.

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Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge