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Exploring teachers' ontologies of English Monolithic conceptions of grammar in a group of Chinese teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a conceptual framework for exploring teachers' ontologies of English and investigates how a group of Chinese university teachers of English conceive of, and orient to, the language. Interview data suggest that participants orient to both a monolithic view as well as the 'plurilithic' reality. The data reveal that monolithic ontologies are associated primarily with classroom contexts, whereas plurilithic ontologies are activated when usage is in focus. Particularly significant is teachers' monolithic conception of grammar, compared to plurilithic conceptions of lexis and pronunciation. We propose that usage-based approaches to grammar might offer teachers a way to reconcile their apparently contradictory ontologies and help them challenge the deficit view of learning inherent in the monolithic approach.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca / International Language, native vs. non-native speakers, language ontology, Standard English, plurilithic

摘要

本文提出了研究教师英语存在论的概念框架，并调查了一群中国大学英语教师如何看待和适应英语。访谈资料表明受访者既认同单一性的观点也接受多重性的现状。资料显示单一存在论主要存在于课堂背景下，而多重性是在语言使用中激发的。相对词汇和发音的多重性观念，教师对语法的单一性观念尤为显著。我们提议以语言运用为基础的语法教学也许可以解决显著的单一与多重并存的矛盾，并且有助于纠正单一论教学法中固有的关于语言学习的错误观念。

关键词：英语作为通用语/国际语言，母语使用者vs.非母语使用者，语言存在论，标准英语，多重

INTRODUCTION

The global enterprise of English language teaching (ELT) is predicated on the (normally implicit) assumption that there is a single entity called English, which can be taught and learnt. Although teachers are familiar with the traditional distinction between British and American 'standard varieties', and many will know about (or be speakers of) local varieties such as Kenyan English or China English, most classrooms, textbooks, and tests conform to a single variety which is presented as 'the English language', especially

with regard to grammar. But it is becoming increasingly apparent to many applied linguists that, in a world of multiple Englishes, an exclusive pedagogical focus on monolithic English is incommensurate with many learners' needs, both local and 'translocal' (e.g. in migrant contexts). The mindset behind such a pedagogy reflects a deficit view of learning, given that the monolithic 'target' can never be internally reproduced in learners' minds with absolute fidelity (Cook, 1999). Moreover, the English resources that learners *do* develop may be perfectly fit for purpose, especially in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) communication (Seidlhofer, 2011).

In this article we probe teachers' sensitivity to the 'plurilithic' reality underlying the monolithic myth of English in one local context, a university in Suzhou, China. We seek to understand the different ontological components of our participants' conceptions, with a view to informing attempts to raise awareness of the diversity of learners' experiences of the language and of the linguistic resources they deploy for usage in their own contexts. As a conceptual framework, we apply the ontological typology developed by Hall (2013), which distinguishes eight different senses of the word *language*, in four domains: the cognitive (language as psychological resource), the expressive (language as external signal), the social (language as shared resource), and the notional (language as autonomous system). We use these ontological categories to shed light on our participants' beliefs about English as it is used, learnt, taught, and tested.

Although teachers' beliefs about English teaching (e.g. Borg, 2006) and their attitudes to English (e.g. Jenkins, 2007) have been quite extensively studied, their beliefs about what English actually is—their ontologies of English—have hardly been explored. This is a very significant lacuna in applied linguistic research. A critical, but under-researched, issue in the 'real world' of ELT is the extent to which teaching and testing practices facilitate the development of linguistic resources that are actually learnable and useable in the diverse contexts of global English. Evidently, teaching practices are informed not only by beliefs about effective methods, but also by teachers' conceptions of what is being taught and learnt. Moreover, teachers play a major role in the transmission of such conceptions to society at large. Harris (2009: 25), for example, claims that what he calls 'implicit language teaching' always accompanies the more explicit language instruction of the classroom: "[W]hether you realize it or not, you are teaching not just English or French or Japanese, but a certain view of what that language is, and also a certain view of what a language is [...]". An understanding of teacher ontologies of English is therefore necessary if applied linguists are to successfully engage with teachers in jointly addressing how to respond to the rapidly changing nature of English users and uses. Accordingly, a practical motivation for the study was to inform the design of an online resource intended to raise teachers' awareness of the complexity of English in the globalizing world and encourage reflection on the implications of this for learning and teaching.

In the open-source online interactive course we developed in part as a practical output of the research reported here (cf. Hall and Wicaksono, 2013; Hall *et al.*, 2013), we propose that teachers can benefit from conceiving of English as a *plurilithic* resource (Pennycook, 2009), constructed by learners on the basis of their local experiences and needs (Hall, 2013; cf. also Kohn, 2011, 2015). Thus conceived, English has fuzzy boundaries, an ambiguous shape and form, and is variable, hybrid, and dynamic. The perceived unity of English emerges from the bottom-up, from individual acts of (effective) communication which exploit complex sets of mentally represented

linguistic knowledge constructed through, and for, socially-mediated acts and events. Many teachers naturally have a strong investment in the monolithic ‘standard’ English that they have had to master and which is almost uniquely sanctioned by standardized examinations and textbooks. But many too are drawn to applied linguistic research which calls into question the unique status of native speaker (NS) ‘standard’ English as the only legitimate model for learners’ needs, aspirations, and outcomes. In designing this project therefore, we set out to investigate teachers’ beliefs in order to find ways to help them apprehend and evaluate, for themselves, the plurilithic reality of English.

Implicit or explicit beliefs in a monolithic model and target for learners of English have, in fact, been challenged in both linguistics and applied linguistics over the past few decades: in World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca, and critical applied linguistics approaches. Within the World Englishes framework (henceforth WE), the emphasis has been on promoting awareness of English as a pluricentric resource no longer dependent on the ‘Inner Circle’, and on describing and codifying local endonormative models (cf. Kachru, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Schneider, 2011). The English as an International Language (EIL) framework explores the implications of WE in applied contexts, including pedagogy (e.g. McKay, 2002; Sharifian, 2009). Some have pointed out, however, that although WE has had very positive effects on ELT by stressing the plurality of English and the fallacy of Inner Circle ‘ownership’ of the language, it has not avoided the problems of monolithism because it attempts only to extend the range of ‘Standard English’ models available, rather than challenging the monolithic thinking behind the notion of ‘standard varieties’: serial monolithism, as it were (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 2009).

More recently, the ELF approach has highlighted the expertise of *non-native users of English* in the Expanding Circle, which in Kachru’s WE model is populated by (implicitly inexpert) *learners*. An initial preoccupation with ‘core’ features of intelligible English and the status of ELF as parallel to English as a Native Language (e.g. Jenkins, 2000, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2001, 2005) left the ELF concept open to charges of monolithism (Y. Kachru and Nelson, 2006, pp. 2-4; Friedrich and Matsuda, 2010; Sewell, 2013). More recent research within the ELF framework has focused on variability of form in the service of principles of communicative effectiveness in oral interaction (Seidlhofer, 2011; Cogo and Dewey, 2012). Monolithic notions of language are, however, hard to expunge completely, and are still implicit in work which stresses a functional ontology of ELF. Seidlhofer (2011), for example, refers to ELF as ‘a natural language’ (pp. 99, 125) and also adopts Widdowson’s (1997) postulation of an underlying ‘virtual’ system of English, (2011, p. 110) referring to the “virtual capacity” of English, “inherent in the encoded language itself.” This capacity is viewed as constituting an “abstract set of rules” (p. 112) constraining, for example, novel morphological structures.

A third approach marginalizes linguistic form even further, and questions the very notion of English. From the perspective of critical applied linguistics, what we call English is a sociohistorical invention, as are all other named languages (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007; Pennycook, 2007, 2009). Within this paradigm, there is a move from referring to people’s *learning and knowing languages* to *developing dynamic repertoires of semiotic resources* (Blommaert, 2010). In other words, the perspective shifts from a monolithic focus on named languages associated with a nation’s monolingual speakers, learned by non-native speakers as subjects in schools, to a concern with individual communicative competences, viewed as ‘patchworks’ of

elements from different languages, and acquired in diverse contexts, to widely different degrees. Using the term introduced in Pennycook (2009), we may label this approach ‘plurilithic’, in explicit repudiation of monolithism. We welcome the way this approach critically reframes the notion of English and English teaching. But when using the ideas in teacher training and development, we have observed that some teachers are alienated by the way the work tends to reject or marginalize traditional concerns of English teachers (notably grammar). Although much of this work comes from outside linguistics and traditional applied linguistics, we believe that its basic tenets can complement, enrich, and be enriched by work in some areas of linguistics and psycholinguistics (Hall, 2013; Hall and Wicaksono, 2013), thus possibly creating a clearer nexus with the concerns of practising teachers. This idea is developed in the next section.

ONTOLOGIES OF ENGLISH

In choosing to explore the ways in which teachers of English conceive of their subject, we are inevitably taking part in the thorny philosophical exercise that Wittgenstein (2002 [1953], p. 41) called “a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.” For the word *language* itself is ambiguous, referring to a range of distinct concepts (cf. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985; Cook, 2010; Hall, 2013). Hall (2013) distinguishes eight different senses, which we group in Table 1 into four domains: (a) *cognitive* (language as cognitive resource, stored and processed in the human mind/brain); (b) *expressive* (language as the external manifestation of internal cognitive intentions); (c) *social* (language as social construct or process); and (d) *notional* (language as an ideal or idealized system).

TABLE 1
Eight senses of the word *language* (adapted from Hall, 2013)

Domain	Sense	Language(s) as ...
Cognitive	<i>The language capacity</i>	... a property of the species
	<i>I-language*</i>	... system(s) in the mind/brain of an individual
Expressive	<i>E-language*</i>	... (bodies of) expressed utterances, texts, structures
	<i>Speech, writing, sign</i>	... physical manifestations of expression
Social	<i>Languaging</i>	... social act(s)
	<i>N-language</i>	... named system(s)
Notional	<i>Idealized I-language</i>	... idealization(s) from individual minds/brains**
	<i>P-language*</i>	... ideal system(s) independent of cognition and use

* Terms first used by Chomsky (1986)

** E.g. in generativist conceptualizations of languages: cf. Hall (2013, pp. 216-219)

Confusion about the sense(s) intended and implied in the use of the word *language*, and consequently also the proper name *English*, has plagued lay and specialist discussions from the earliest days of talk about talk. A particular problem arises in applied linguistics and ELT when social constructions like monolithic English (*N-language*) are construed as being underpinned by an abstract set of rules which is independent of cognition and use (*P-language*). This is the case of traditional pedagogical grammars which present the language as subsets of codified ‘Standard English’ norms, or of more nuanced but still apparently monolithic conceptions such as Widdowson’s (1997) ‘Virtual English’, a ‘resource’ which specifies what is possible in the language. In both cases, English is essentialized as a single system which brooks no variation (in the first case) or constrains variation (in the second). Similar problems arise for applied linguistics and ELT with the concept of English as instances of expression (*E-language*). This is the case of corpus-based grammars, for example, which are normally constructed on the basis of NS usage, and privilege NS varieties. In fact, what native speakers and second language learners of English actually come to know and use is neither P- nor E-language, but their own *I-language*, the individual repertoire of linguistic resources which is constantly developing and adapting to specific circumstances through usage (*linguaging* experiences).

Our research is motivated by a desire to understand teachers’ views about what English is and what these ontologies imply for their classroom role: do teachers interpret their role as being guides to I-language development, instructors of P-languages, or models of E-language? Using this conceptual framework to interrogate teachers’ beliefs, we hope to be able to work with them to develop more reflective and realistic ways of helping learners construct the linguistic resources best suited to their future usage contexts.

THE STUDY

Objectives

The objectives of the qualitative study described here were: (a) to explore the ontologies of English of a group of Chinese teachers of English; and (b) to gauge how, and to what extent, they might engage with teacher development resources presenting a plurilithic ontology of English (Hall *et al.*, 2013).

Research context

Although research on teacher ontologies of English is of relevance in all parts of the world, there are several reasons why China is a particularly interesting context to investigate. First, the sheer scale of the ELT enterprise there, with more learners and teachers of English than any other country (Wen, 2012). Second, the fact that China has developed a similarly monolithic ideology of the national language, with Standard Mandarin (Putonghua) the only official language in what is actually a linguistically diverse nation, reinforced by traditionally strong attachments to notions of norms and correctness. Third, there is concern that English learning and teaching in China is not producing fluent communicators (e.g. Whitely and Xiangyi, 2011).

In China, learning English is often seen as a tool of internal social and economic mobility rather than as a set of resources for communication with speakers of other languages (Zhao and Campbell, 1995). One might expect that this would translate into a generalized predisposition towards a monolithic conception of English, determined by external authority. Recent research, however, suggests that although there is a

preference for learning US or UK ‘standard’ versions of English, both teachers and learners are open to the idea of a Chinese variety of English (Hu, 2005), notably in terms of pronunciation (He and Li, 2009; He and Zhang, 2010), but not necessarily as a pedagogical model (Meilin and Xiaoqiong, 2007). No research has yet explored Chinese teachers’ ontologies of English along a broader monolithic – plurilithic continuum.

The present research was conducted with teachers of English from the School of Foreign Languages at Suzhou University of Science and Technology (SUST). The School offers English for English majors (many of whom aspire to a career in ELT), English for non-majors, and Japanese. The university, a public institution specializing in science and technology, has just under 14,000 full-time students, and is located in Suzhou, a city of 10.5 million inhabitants in Jiangsu province, west of Shanghai. This site was chosen because two of the authors are teachers in the School’s English Department, as colleagues of the participants in this study. As members of the department, these two authors have access to a relevant research context (see above). As peers of the participants, they also have the kind of relationships that are considered likely to allow for the views and feelings of informants to emerge (Robson, 2002, p. 283). These authors brought insider knowledge of the aspects of their context that the participants in our study considered important. With this awareness of the subjective experiences of the participants, the two authors, as interviewers, were able to interact with the participants flexibly, probing with skill and sensitivity as necessary.

Participants

Eight teachers from the School’s English Department were selected at random to be interviewed; they provided written consent for the interviews to be audio recorded and for their data to be cited (with all potentially identifying information anonymized). The participants were broadly representative of the English teaching staff as a whole. Seven were female, and one male. Six were in their 30s or 40s; two (Mr G and Ms R) were in their 50s or 60s. Information about their education, training, and experience in English-speaking countries is given in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Interview participants

	Education	Teacher training	Experience
<i>Ms A</i>	BA English; MA English	No formal training	9 years
<i>Ms C</i>	BA TESOL; MA Eng Lit	BA TESOL	8 years
<i>Ms D</i>	BA English; MA IT	Very little	10 years
<i>Ms F</i>	BA English; MA Eng Lit	No formal training	5 years
<i>Mr G</i>	BA TESOL	BA TESOL	31 years
<i>Ms H</i>	BA English	No formal training	15 years

<i>Ms R</i>	BA English Translation; MA TESOL	MA TESOL	29 years
<i>Ms Y</i>	BA TESOL; MA TESOL (USA)	BA & MA TESOL	22 years

All participants had worked exclusively at SUST and six had lived and worked only in China. Ms R spent two periods (each less than six months) as a visiting scholar in Canada and Hong Kong; Ms Y studied her MA in the USA.

Design and procedure

Instead of structured interview questions, the interviewers initially elicited responses from the eight participants through the presentation of four ‘data prompts’. Given that we aimed to assess participants’ sensitivity to the plurilithic reality of English, we hoped that showing them relevant data would help to ground their responses in this reality, as well as provide appropriate scaffolding. The data prompts were short extracts from online sources, selected for their relevance to key issues in monolithic thinking, including: the notion of ‘correctness’ in English; the disjunction between proficiency in ‘Standard English’ and communicative success; NS idiomaticity and its relevance for NNS learning and usage contexts; and the implications of global Englishes for ELT. The interviewers showed participants each prompt in turn and asked them to comment on the data using a general introductory question. After the participant’s initial response, the interviewers deployed a series of semi-structured follow-up questions as needed, guided by an ‘elicitation brief’ for each prompt, written by the project team. The Appendix contains a list of the initial elicitation questions and examples of possible follow-up questions for each prompt, extracted from the full elicitation brief.

The first prompt shown was a series of blog postings by three bloggers, exhibiting different degrees of variation from NS norms, but in which no communicative trouble or misunderstandings were evident. The second prompt was an extract from an interview given by Ban Ki-Moon, UN General Secretary, for a Russian news agency. Interviewers drew participants’ attention to the fact that commentators have reacted unfavourably to Ban’s non-native forms of English, despite the sophisticated functions it performs. For the third prompt, interviewees were asked to react to a page from the *BBC Learning English* website which presented examples of NS idioms featuring the word *pie* (e.g. ‘to be pie-eyed’). Participants’ views were elicited with respect to the utility of such material for learners, given its cultural restrictiveness (cf. Seidlhofer, 2011, pp. 134-7, on ‘unilateral idiomaticity’). The fourth prompt was a graph from Graddol’s (2006) report on the future of English. The graph records the recent growth in learner numbers and projects a massive increase and then stabilization over the coming years.

Two of the authors (Liu and Qian) conducted the interviews, in Mandarin. They were colleagues of the participants and were known to them. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed in Mandarin, and then translated into English by the two interviewers. As we read through the first drafts of the English language transcripts, we discussed key terms (such as *proficiency*, *competence*, *pure*, *perfect*, *standard*, *authentic*), and agreed on consistent translations. The insight provided by the two

interviewers into the possible meanings of these terms was essential to the project team's understanding of the interview data.

Results and analysis

Using a template approach to qualitative data analysis, whereby key codes are determined on an *a priori* basis (Robson, 2002, p. 458), the translations of the interviews were initially coded for monolithically- and plurilithically-orientated statements. In the second phase of analysis, the transcripts were re-examined to identify interviewer questions which might have resulted in the interviewee being encouraged to orientate in favour of either monolithic or plurilithic perspectives. Some of these questions derived from the elicitation briefs and some emerged spontaneously during the interview. In the third phase of analysis, we went back to our initial coding and identified patterns of association between monolithic/plurilithic perspectives, conceptualizations of language, and comments about users/contexts of use. From these patterns we were able to elaborate a set of possible generalizations, described below, which cover many of the (in)consistencies observed in the data. Overall, our approach to data analysis follows what Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 9) describe as a 'fairly classic set of analytical moves'.

The main finding of the first phase of analysis was that no interviewee oriented to either consistently monolithic or consistently plurilithic positions; all eight expressed a mixture of opinions throughout their interview. The results of the second phase of the analysis showed that the interviewees' opinions did not seem to be constrained by the orientation of the interviewers' questions; indeed, another benefit of the existing relationship between the interviewers and interviewees appeared to be that the latter felt free to challenge the opinions of the former, and did so on a number of occasions.

Overall, the most striking feature of the responses, as suggested by the third phase of analysis, was the correlation between a monolithic orientation and: (a) conceptualizations of language that privileged the abstract/ideal over the individual/social; (b) discussion of language as a subject, learnt and taught in classroom contexts; and (c) language as a fixed set of grammatical rules. The corollary was an equally notable correlation between a plurilithic orientation and: (a) conceptualizations of language that focused on the individual/social over the abstract/ideal; (b) discussions of language use in interaction outside the classroom; and (c) language as variable lexis and diverse local accents.

The internal inconsistencies in orientation observed in each participant's responses appear to be explicable in terms of the distinct ontologies of language that may be inferred to co-exist in their underlying belief systems. For example, monolithic conceptualizations of language as an abstract or ideal system (as P-language) appeared to be activated in comments about grammar; conversely, in references to the emergence of new words or to accent variation, language appeared to be viewed as a set of individual resources (I-language) or a collection of diverse language structures (E-language). In what follows, we illustrate these findings through a selection of extracts from the interview data in which participants' shifting orientations are particularly clearly indexed.

Conflicting orientations

In general, participants do not appear to recognize, or attempt to reconcile, their conflicting orientations. For example, although in (1) Ms H suggests that a 'standard'

version of English exists, in (2), from later in the interview, she frankly denies that such a standard can be defined.

Ms H: [...] if it's a formal official political occasion, people should speak Standard English.

Ms H: [...] A language is developing all the time. It's impossible to define the standard.

And in (3), Ms D attributes to native speakers a greater role in 'rule-making', but then in (4) denies that there are people who should have such a role.

Ms D: [...] they are native users and thus have more say in rule-making of the language.

Ms D: [...] I really don't want to use the word 'fair' because that sounds like someone there above everyone else is making the rules and judging all Englishes. I don't believe in any 'super power' in judging the quality of Englishes.

In most cases, the inconsistency between monolithic and plurilithic orientations appears to be correlated with participants' shifting conceptualizations of language and whether or not they are addressing or invoking a teaching context. In the following sections we develop and illustrate this finding.

'Standard English' as ideal

Throughout the interview transcripts, participants appear to be expressing a belief in the ideal of a single, monolithic P-language version of English—'the language' itself, as it were—even though this belief co-exists with more plurilithic conceptions and they acknowledge that its actual existence may be hard to demonstrate. Ms F is an example in point. When reacting to the bloggers' English usage, she expresses plurilithic notions, denying that there is or should be one correct form. In her suggestion that this way of thinking is 'what the so-called standardized tests led people to believe', she appears to be positioning herself as a critic of such tests and therefore of notions of monolithic target varieties. And asked subsequently how a person's competence in English should be judged, she responds:

Ms F: It should be judged by whether one can express his ideas.

Further evidence of a plurilithic orientation can be seen in her reaction to the graph from Graddol (2006), where she contemplates the idea of teaching different kinds of English:

Int: [...] Do you mean that the more growth of ELT outside the UK and USA there are...

Ms F: The more kinds of English we should teach.

But then contradicting these plurilithic views, she rejects the idea that 'non-standard' features of English might have a place in the classroom. Asked about teaching 'lingua franca' features of English, she answers:

Ms F: We shouldn't encourage the use of their language, anyway, that's not standard English.

She is explicit about her conceptualization of 'standard' English as an abstract P-language, independent even of its native speakers, as the following interaction shows:

Ms F: I believe in the existence of Standard English, perhaps it's some idealistic existence. There should be standards.

Int: Ok. So you think there is Standard English and there should be standards.

Ms F: Yes. Maybe it doesn't really exist in reality. When we speak, the language is never standard.

Int: Is that because we are non-native speakers? Can native speakers speak Standard English?

Ms F: Even native speakers can't speak Standard English—the idealistic, perfect, Standard English.

It is apparent that for Ms F, the notion of 'Standard English' is far removed from the realities of linguistic communication, even for native speakers. It is an article of faith, but no less strong in her personal ontology of English for that.

Englishes inside and outside the classroom

There is a generalized perception that a monolithic 'standard' variety must serve as a pedagogical model, but is inappropriate for actual use (languaging). The following pair of excerpts from Ms C's interview reflect this:

Ms C: [f]ormal education in school must have a single standard.

Ms C: [...] in practical use, you can't judge [language use] only by the standard.

Ms R, who positions herself throughout the interview as a specialist in intercultural communication as well as an EFL teacher, is clear that what is of overriding importance is communicative success. But when it comes to models of English to be used for pedagogical purposes, she is adamant that only Inner Circle Englishes are appropriate, comparing the situation with that of 'Standard' Mandarin:

Int: Then can I say that you think in English teaching and testing, British and American English should be applied as the model?

Ms R: Definitely. For example, when we learn Mandarin, of course you want to learn Standard Mandarin. It's impossible for people to learn Mandarin in Fujian [...]

(Inhabitants of Fujian province are commonly believed to have a particularly strong accent in Mandarin, the result of cross-linguistic influence from the local Min languages.) This statement is particularly revealing in the light of her prior statements about Mandarin, where the analogy is used to align herself more with a plurilithic orientation:

Int: Do you think there should be one 'standard' English, or one form of English use?

Ms R: I don't think so. Language is developing, especially in the age of globalization. Languages all have their new varieties. For example, we have different kinds of Mandarin in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. But those new Mandarins don't hinder communication.

Similarly, Ms A is happy for her students to embrace diversity when deploying their linguistic resources outside the classroom. But—significantly—she expresses the belief that the classroom is a context for more restricted language:

Ms A: [I]t's crucially important to have standards. Students can use all kinds of varieties; they can speak Singapore English when they go there. But when we teach, we have to establish standards.

This stance is shared by Mr G:

Mr G: I think plenty of people in India, Hong Kong, Taiwan can speak fluent English, but they also make small mistakes. I think, in this case, the grammatical mistakes can be accepted. But it also depends. If English is being learned in the class, students should lay a solid foundation of language learning, and a standard grammar should be emphasized.

It is striking that, throughout the transcripts, language as a school subject is understood in a very different way from language in its more ubiquitous contexts outside the classroom. This dichotomy reflects a clash between the dominant conception of language as P- (or E-language) in the former context, and as I-language and languaging in the latter. Participants show evidence of a generalized belief that teaching from a monolithic P-language model is a necessary condition for I-language and languaging development, so the classroom should be a domain for ‘Standard English’ only.

The resilience of monolithic ontologies

Despite some participants’ awareness that the monolithic ‘standard’ variety of the language is hard to pin down, and the willingness of all eight to adopt plurilithic orientations to some degree and in some contexts, monolithic conceptions are very deep-seated. For example, like Ms A, Ms H displays on the whole a plurilithic orientation. She is open to the increasing legitimacy of Outer Circle Englishes. She is in favour of teaching ‘lingua franca’ strategies and is lukewarm about requiring students to use ‘correct English’ under all circumstances. She appears to question the idea of a mandated ‘correct’ version of the language:

Ms H: A language is developing all the time. It’s impossible to define the standard. No one has the right to issue a document that says ‘I am the standard’.

But like the other participants, and despite the statement in (16), she appears to assume that English does have an ideal unitary form, where ‘the rules’ reside, which exists independently of its users. For example, she states that the bloggers’ English ‘doesn’t always follow the rules’ and also that NSs break them too:

Ms H: [...] Native speakers, it’s their language, and they know exactly when to follow [or] break rules.

Further, she states that Outer Circle Englishes might be accepted ‘however impure they are’. And she clearly associates the teaching of English with the ‘purer’ varieties. When asked, in the context of the Graddol (2006) graph, whether the increased demand for English around the world represented opportunities or challenges for organizations like the British Council or ETS (which offers the TOEFL exam), she responds:

Ms H: Both. It means more business for them, and that’s opportunities. They will face a great challenge that there will be increasing impure Englishes.

So, despite a conviction that function is more important than form, the form of English is still conceived in terms of a pure monolithic standard and departures from it (P-language), rather than as a variable and dynamic range of formal options spread across users and uses (I- and E-language).

Monolithic orientations pertain mostly to grammar

The interview with Ms D allows us to dig deeper into the differing contextual and ontological domains of the two orientations and to interrogate the notion of monolithic form in greater detail. A possibility that emerges from Ms D’s very considered argument, and that is confirmed by data from the other participants, is that a key factor in the apparent contradiction in orientations is grammar, as opposed to the other major formal domains (lexis and pronunciation). After Ms D’s initial positive reactions to the idioms on the *Learning English* website (even though she is not herself familiar with them), the interviewer asks whether she believes it is useful to teach and test such structures. It is, we think, significant that in the following extract her understanding of

the flexibility of English form in a pedagogical model is illustrated by its nonnative users' expansion of their lexical, rather than grammatical, repertoire.

Int: So you believe it's useful to teach these idioms?

Ms D: Absolutely. If we go to those English-speaking countries, people there would use idioms like these.

Int: Since you brought up 'native speakers', is an insistence on so-called 'native-speaker' models useful for teachers and learners?

Ms D: But there are different varieties of native-speaker Englishes. People are inventing new language on Facebook and Twitter every day. There doesn't seem to be a fixed native-speaker model.

Int: Let's forget about whether there's one native-speaker model and focus on, for example, whether we should insist on 'native-speaker' models in English teaching.

Ms D: I think we should allow some flexibility in that regard. Language is a living thing, changing all the time. For example, recently a new buzz word *geili* was invented in Chinese, and people have been trying to fix an English equivalent of it. [...] We can just use the most dynamic, the most popular language without following a model.

The conceptualization of language evidenced here is as E- or P-language which is plurilithic to the extent that it can 'accommodate' different lexical structures. In fact, in her reference to 'inventing new language on Facebook and Twitter', she is using the term *language* in the direct sense of 'lexical structures' (E-language). Her liberal view on lexis is in stark contrast to her view of grammar in the classroom: earlier she had insisted that only 'Standard English' should be taught in school, where 'standard' means for her "conforming to grammatical rules". In the context of Ban Ki Moon's usage of English, she states:

Ms D: [S]tudents should be taught Standard English in school, for the reason that when they use English, their English proficiency shows in details, and the education quality does, too. The ultimate objective of education is to improve one's overall performance. Thus, in school education, it should be strict; whereas in real-life use, it could be relaxed.

When asked whether Outer Circle Englishes or ELF usage may play a role in the classroom, she adamantly rejects the appropriateness of such a move, but concedes that learners might be exposed to patterns of variation in pronunciation:

Ms D: [w]hen learning English, we can just stick to Standard English. Then we can familiarize ourselves with some features, actually the phonetic features, of other Englishes to get prepared for communication with different peoples.

At the end of the interview she again adopts a plurilithic orientation to English, this time questioning the gatekeeping role of native speakers, but again it appears to be restricted to the domain of lexis:

Ms D: We can't deem language as something rigid. Language is changing all the time and is not controlled by anyone.

Int: So not even by native speakers?

Ms D: For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* has recently collected a Chinese word: *chengguan* ('urban management staff'). So native speakers should be broad-minded to assimilate new and dynamic

language, rather than pose as the owner of the language and refuse any emerging stuff.

Ms D's pattern of ontological commitments emerges particularly clearly from the data, but is fully consistent with the data we recorded from other participants. For instance, although Ms Y's interview also ends with a strong expression of beliefs which demonstrate a plurilithic orientation, this is followed once again by a reference to "grammar mistakes" as her students' leading problem:

Ms Y: [...] I don't think his [Ban's] language competence is low. He knows all the words he needs to know in his field, and there are only a few tiny errors in his language. It would be wonderful if our students could have the same competence. The problems of our students are: firstly, grammar mistakes; secondly, they don't know how to express themselves in English.

DISCUSSION

The disjunction we observed between teachers' beliefs about English as taught/learnt in the classroom (the 'language subject' in Widdowson's [2003] terms) and social usage beyond the classroom (the 'object language' in action) is perhaps unsurprising. This is especially so in the context of China, where much learning and teaching of English is motivated and constrained by the need for students to pass the College English Test, rather than to acquire a usable set of linguistic skills for communication. A parallel finding in more general work on teacher ontologies is worth noting here. Schraw and colleagues (cf. Schraw, 2013) found that, on a rating scale, teachers tended to self-identify as *relativists*, believing that different people have different realities (consistent with a plurilithic orientation). In interviews, however, they reported *realist* classroom practices, in which there was an assumption of one underlying reality that is the same for everyone (consistent with a monolithic orientation).

A novel and potentially very significant finding that emerges from our study is participants' identification of the concept of 'language subject' with a monolithic P-language ontology of English as an ideal *grammatical* system, independent of E-language lexical and phonological diversity. To our knowledge, the exclusively monolithic status of grammar in teachers' ontologies of English has not been commented on in previous studies. It is interesting that the participants in our study, whose teaching experiences and philosophies have been fashioned largely within traditional Chinese pedagogical contexts, do show a reflectiveness and openness with regard to plurilithic conceptions of English. Yet a major barrier to a fuller consideration and possible adoption of a plurilithic ontology of English appears to be the resilient belief in an ideal grammatical system, most closely identified with 'standard' native-speaker norms, but independent of native speakers' actual E-language structures and languaging practices.

Work on the teaching of grammar (cf. e.g. Ellis, 2006), and teachers' beliefs about, and awareness of, grammar (e.g. Borg, 2006), fails to question the monolithic assumption that English is defined essentially by a single grammatical system. Indeed, such work commonly assumes, or explicitly refers to, concepts such as '**the** grammar of the target language' (Ellis, 2006, p. 6; emphasis added). The relevance for ELT of alternative models or targets in grammar teaching (and testing) has been highlighted by scholars adopting WE, EIL, and ELF perspectives (e.g. McKay, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Matsuda, 2012; Alsagoff *et al.*, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011; Cogo and Dewey, 2012).

But work in these orientations does not explicitly acknowledge the plurilithic nature of English, and much of it tends to underestimate many teachers' attachment to the idea of monolithic grammatical norms (Timmis, 2002; He and Zhang, 2010), even in the face of dedicated training on different varieties of the language (e.g. Suzuki, 2011).

In contrast, socially-oriented plurilithic work (e.g. Pennycook, 2007, 2009; Canagarajah, 2007) downplays or rejects the importance of grammar, despite teachers' (and learners') beliefs and concerns. Our data suggest that what is needed is a way to recognize teachers' concerns about grammar and rules, but at the same time dissolve the seemingly indissoluble association between these and monolithic concepts of P-language. One prospect, adopted in the interactive, online materials informed by the research reported here (Hall and Wicaksono, 2013), is to reconceptualize grammar for teachers as the emergent, mentally represented regularities which result from participation in meaningful English usage events, rather than as ideal external systems which are independent of users and uses. In this way, socially-oriented plurilithic approaches to language (which neglect grammar) are married with cognitive approaches which recast grammar as local I-language construction (Hall, 2013). Accordingly, our material for teachers incorporates ideas from usage-based accounts of language acquisition, which highlight the ways in which learners develop their language resources internally on the basis of the detection and mental tallying of frequent patterns of meaningful usage (Hall *et al.*, 2006; Ellis, 2008; Eskildsen, 2009). In terms of the ontological categories applied in the present study, such usage-based accounts explain the construction of I-languages on the basis of learners' engagement with, and implicit analysis of, E-language, experienced through languaging events. This is a realistic view of contemporary language learning. Learners have never before had, or taken up, so many languaging opportunities: events in which they can interact meaningfully in English with other users (most of them fellow NNSs), especially these days through electronic media (Warschauer, 2000; Thorne and Reinhardt, 2008).

Thus, focusing on learners as users, we encourage teachers to think through how grammatical and other linguistic resources are developed internally as an emergent process, through socially-mediated communicative events, rather than reproduced from an external monolithic model. Specifically, we suggest that an awareness of usage-based approaches to grammar could help teachers reconcile the apparently incompatible ontologies of English we have documented in this study, by encouraging them to conceptualize grammatical rules not as immutable P-language norms, but as part of learner-constructed I-languages that might (or might not) coincide with particular E-language descriptions. In this way, the online course in which these ideas are explored mediates between the theory underpinning our conceptual framework for language ontologies and the beliefs about the subject matter which inform teachers' pedagogical practice.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have presented a framework for exploring teachers' conceptualizations of English and applied it to a group of teachers in a Chinese university. The framework distinguishes eight different senses of the word *language*, covering cognitive, expressive, social, and notional domains. This framework allows us to 'unpack' the essentialized conceptualizations of English that figure in much discourse on the language, both 'expert' and 'non-expert'. The goal of the empirical study reported here was to explore participants' ontologies of English using this framework, in order to

inform attempts to raise teachers' awareness and thus enable them to develop, or more readily engage with, alternative pedagogical models. The interview data demonstrate that teachers orient to both monolithic and plurilithic conceptions of English. A principal finding is that grammar, rather than lexis or phonology, constitutes the major obstacle to adopting an ontology of English which corresponds to the realities of the learning process and of usage contexts beyond the classroom. The teachers we interviewed view the rules of grammar as obtaining externally (*rule* as 'regulation') rather than as constructed internally (*rule* as 'regularity'). For them, usage (even by native speakers) invariably falls short of the ideal rule system. Such a monolithic view, we contend, will result in a deficit perspective on learning.

The challenge of raising awareness about alternative ontologies of language through the discourse of plurilithic Englishes remains a considerable one, not least because, despite signs of increased interest in global Englishes, it is still teaching method and materials which attract the most attention. We think it is significant, for example, that in an edited review of 'area[s] or issue[s] that had been prominent in ELT' since 1995 (Morrow, 2012), only two of 13 articles deal with the nature of English. We suggest that engagement with usage-based approaches to grammar and language learning might help teachers reflect on their conceptions of English and recognise the deficit view of learning that these conceptions may entail. This is a major purpose of the online resource for teachers developed in part as a result of this research (Hall and Wicaksono, 2013). The appropriateness and potential success of awareness-raising ventures such as this will vary considerably, depending on context. Clearly, further study is required to evaluate the effectiveness of such ventures, to compare them with alternatives, and to ultimately ground them in pedagogical policy and practice.

In raising teachers' ontological awareness, we hope to get them to think about the dynamic English resources that their learners will construct and deploy for effective usage, and to orient their teaching towards facilitating those outcomes. If ELT is to adapt to the plurilithic reality of global English, such a process of reflection, realization, and action will become increasingly important for the profession. Despite the intractable nature of teachers' beliefs about grammar, our interview data confirm previous findings which suggest that teachers have already made significant steps towards embracing a non-monolithic vision of English.

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Appendix: Extracts from elicitation briefs

Prompt	Initial response elicitation	Possible follow-up questions
1	"Here's a screenshot from a blog about computers written by a Chinese blogger in English. NNSs from other countries have commented on the blog and there's no evidence of miscommunication. Take a look at the English used and tell me your initial reactions."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you seen software used in the plural before? Do you think it matters? Why (not)? • Why do you think this is considered an error by many EFL teachers? • Are you aware that in Indian English, etc. softwares is normal, even if not in formal writing? Do you find this problematic? Why (not)? • Do you think each word or structure in English has or should have only one correct form? Why (not)?
2	"Here's a screenshot from an interview between a Russian journalist and the Korean Secretary General of the United Nations. Take a look at the English used by one of the most important people in the world and tell me your initial reactions."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think [NNS] features of Ban's speech are problematic? Why (not)? • How is a person's competence in a language judged and are these judgments always fair? • Should people who do not use a variety of English that is believed to be 'standard' be considered incompetent users? • Is it fair when people are judged on their use of English and NOT on their

		ideas/behaviour etc.? Why (not)?
3	"This is a screenshot of a page from the BBC Learning English website. Would you encourage your students to use this particular example of English language learning material? Why (not)?"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think about the usefulness of teaching/testing such items in English language classrooms in China and worldwide? • To what extent is an insistence on 'native-speaker' models useful for teachers and learners? • Should students be taught the uses of English (forms and strategies) that are most likely to be useful to them? • Should such students be taught 'lingua franca' features of English, such as the ones used by BKM and the contributors to the discussion board?
4	"This is from a report published in 2006 showing the predicted growth in the number of learners of English around the world in the next few years. You can see how since 2000 there has been explosive growth. What do you think about this?"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What implications do you think this pattern of growth might have for the TESOL profession? • Do you think this pattern of growth provides challenges or opportunities for agencies like the British Council or organizations like ETS? • What role, if any, do you see for Indian English, etc. in TESOL and international relations in the future? • Have you ever thought about the kinds of English that learners will want to study in the future?