The growing ubiquity of the English language the world over is turning traditional notions of who is and is not a native speaker on its head.

Today’s use of the English language among millions in emerging markets -- going global at the expense of the US and Europe -- is reversing generations of British and American English serving as the standard, raising key questions as to what is standard English and who is a native speaker?

Nearly a billion people around the world speak English, which means that more people speak English as a second language than there are native speakers. In Asia, the number of English-users has surpassed 350 million, equal to the number of people who live in countries where English is the dominant language: the United States, Britain and Canada. More Chinese children now study English -- about 100 million -- than there are Britons.

“There’s never before been a language that’s been spoken by more people as a second language than a first,” says David Crystal, whose numerous books include English as a Global Language.

Consider the professional in Krakow whose regular interactions with colleagues in India necessitates brushing up on her English skills. But rather than listening to the British pronunciations she was likely exposed to during her Polish equivalent of English 101, through an on-line English language learning site her ears become attuned to the English spoken by the native speaker from Bangalore.

English is being shaped and re-shaped by these new “native speakers” as well as by the growing legions that learn it as a second language. “The new English-speakers aren’t just passively absorbing the language, they’re shaping it,” wrote Newsweek reporter Carla Power in her prescient 2005 article, “Not the Queen’s English.”

New forms of English are mushrooming the globe over, ranging from “Taglish,” the Tagalog-infused English spoken in the Philippines, to “Japlish” to “Hinglish,” the mix of Hindi and English that now crops up everywhere from fast-food ads to South Asian college campuses.

Novelist and cultural commentator Ilan Stavens asserts in his book “Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language” that Latinos should not have to give up this “in-betweeness that is Spanglish,” what he describes as “a creative way also of saying, I am an American and I have my own style, my own taste, my own tongue.”

While Arizona is trying to put a finger in the dike regarding accented English by contemplating legislation that would forbid teachers with an “accent” from teaching ESL, others are effectively and profitably embracing this growing phenomenon.

GlobalEnglish, an on-line English-language learning site, includes a database of accents and dialects of English that trains learners to recognize native and non-native accents as well as the differences in tone and appropriateness, while also mastering practical business expressions as they choose from over 60 countries and dialects.

“Global companies are increasingly made up of non-native speakers of English,” says Les Schmidt, chief operations officer of GlobalEnglish, which includes mega multinationals such as IBM, Deloitte, and Hilton. “As a consequence, an enormous number of business interactions that occur in English are between two non-native speakers. Our goal is to help support the development of a common communication tool.”

“English is an open-source language,” says CEO Deepak Desai. “There is an academy in France that decides what constitutes a French word. But there is no academy that decides what an English word is.”

In my work as Chief Diversity Officer with a global outsourcing and consulting firm, I often confront the issue of how to handle requests for accent reduction. The real issue here however is not accent but intelligibility. Can people understand what the speaker is saying?

There are plenty of employees who have an “accent” that traditional native speakers may not like, but who are intelligible. And then there are those who, because of their accent, really have a hard time being understood. We need to distinguish between the two.

Lack of intelligibility is a detriment to all parties concerned and will assuredly limit that individual’s career advancement capabilities no matter how talented they may be. But when people are intelligible regardless of how they sound when they speak English, it behooves us to be on guard against ethnocentric or even prejudicial attitudes that demand accent reduction.

Keep in mind that in an upside-down world, it’s the native English speakers who may have to brush up on their comprehension of English a la Hindi, Spanish, Polish, and Arabic.