

David Doms
460140

Roles and Impact of English As a Global Language

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The following quotations may be seen as representing a range of opinion in a debate about the role of English as an international language:

i) 'English is neutral'

since no cultural requirements are tied to the learning of English, [...] English belongs to everyone or no one, or at least is quite often regarded as having this property.

Ronald Wardhaugh (1987)

ii) 'English is imperialist'

What is at stake when English spreads is not merely the substitution or displacement of one language by another [...] from an awareness of this aspect of English linguistic imperialism.

Robert Phillipson (1992)

iii) 'English is democratic'

there have been comments made about other structural aspects, too [...] that does express an intricate system of class relationships.

David Crystal (1997)

What is your opinion? Discuss, with reference to the roles played by language in the development and maintenance of 'society' and of 'culture'. You may refer to any non-English speaking society with which you are familiar, in order to exemplify your points.

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1.0. Introduction

With an estimated 350 million native speakers and 1,900 million competent speakers, the spread of the English language around the world over the last few decades has been swift and steady: “just as Latin steamrolled its way across Europe 2,000 years ago, crushing dozens of other languages, English has become the lingua franca of our times.” (Morrison 2002: para. 7) For the first time in history, a language is being used internationally for wider communication. English has become part of the lives of millions of people and the multiple crucial roles it now fulfills affect societies at every level. Nevertheless, it has also often been adopted with ambivalent feelings, sometimes being perceived as neutral and ‘de-nativized’, but more often as imperialist and oppressive, or democratic and liberating. These circumstances have also turned the teaching of English into a controversial and politicized topic in many countries.

The aim of this paper is to describe the different roles which the English language is taking up across the globe while trying to evaluate the impact it is having on other cultures. The first part will review the importance of language in the maintenance of a society; the second and third parts will describe and analyze the main functions of the English language in the expanding and outer circles, while the fourth and fifth sections will discuss the future of English and the implications for teaching a language that has become global.

2.0. English in the Inner Circle

English speakers can be roughly divided into three groups: native speakers, speakers of English as a second language, and speakers of English as a foreign language. Kachru (1994: 137) coined the terms ‘Inner circle’, ‘Outer circle’, and ‘Expanding circle’ to categorize the three concentric circles of English use. The kind of English predominantly spoken in the Inner circle (the U.K., the U.S.A., Australia, etc...) is the Standard British / American English.

2.1. Language, Culture and Society

A few important terms are to be defined to show the decisive importance of language in any society. According to Wardhaugh (1986: 1), a language is “what the members of a particular society speak,” and a society is “any group of people who are drawn together for a certain purpose or purposes.” Since humans live in groups, a common bond is needed to promote a sense of brotherhood and duty among them: a culture. Wardhaugh (1986: 211) defines it in a sociological sense as “the ‘know-how’ that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living” in a society. Every culture has its own history, values, customs, shared beliefs, institutions, methods of expressions, etc... Language being a code shared with other people, it is intimately tied to culture:

Culture refers to the process whereby particular kinds of learning contagiously spread from person to person in a community and minds become coordinated into shared patterns, just as a *language* or a *dialect* refers to the process whereby the different speakers in a community acquire highly similar mental grammars.” (Pinker 1994: 427)

It is perhaps with religion the most essential part of the maintenance of any culture:

Knowledge of a language is undeniably part of one’s cultural heritage. A good portion of one’s identity as a member of a cultural group comes from being able to speak the group’s

language. Much of our cultural knowledge is expressed to us in that language.
(Baker 2001: 201)

Therefore, since cultures and languages are entwined and do not evolve separately, the development of a society is also connected to language.

2.2. Language, Cognition and Identity

All people have culturally conditioned behavior. The relationship between language, thought, and identity is very complex but, without completely adhering to Whorf's linguistic determinism, it can safely be said that words are the vehicles of thought and that thought governs most of our lives in one way or another. A sure way of destroying a nation's culture and identity is to debase its language, which is why several countries have an institution (the French Academy, for example) dedicated to keeping their language 'pure' and perpetuating 'correct' usage. As Crystal (1997: ix) writes, "there is no more intimate or more sensitive an index of identity than language." How people define themselves and view the world is closely tied to the language they speak, and this has widespread effects such as ethnic differentiation. For example, although intelligibility exists between the Croatian and the Serb languages, or between the Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish languages, the speakers of these languages regard themselves as a distinct people speaking different languages.

2.3. From the Inner Circle to the Rest of the World

"Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture." (Agar 1994: 28) English, despite being a mongrel language itself, carries the values of the Western civilization (based on the Judeo-Christian tradition, Greek rationalism, a Roman sense of justice, etc...) and the specificities of the Anglo-Saxon culture (individualism, the Protestant work ethic, etc...) which have fed the development of the West:

The present-day world status of English is primarily the result of two factors: the expansion of British colonial power [...] and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the twentieth century. (Crystal 1997: 53)

In the Inner circle, English is the language of identity for its native speakers. However, when transferred to countries in the Outer and Expanding circles, English becomes an alien form of expression with different structural properties and a different vocabulary to organize experience. A language, contrary to Wardhaugh's definition, can never be 'neutral' in the sense of 'free of cultural influences', although it may fulfill different roles in foreign countries. Since language has been described as "one of the most important forms of human symbolic behaviour and [...] a key component of many groups' social identities," (Coupland and Jaworski 1997: 323) it is conceivable that English might be regarded as democratic, liberating, or threatening in societies outside the Inner circle.

3.0. Roles and Impact of English in the Expanding Circle

The kind of English largely spoken in the Expanding circle (South Korea, where the author of this paper has taught for the past four years, Russia, Brazil, Greece, etc...) is the international colloquial English, learned as a foreign language. Those nations "recognize

the importance of English as an international language, though they do not have a history of colonization by the inner circle, nor have they given English any special administrative status.” (Crystal 1997: 54) This is the fastest-growing section of world speakers of English.

3.1. Access to Knowledge and Modernization

According to Pennycook (in Burns and Coffin 2001: 85) the spread of English has facilitated the spread of the discourses and agendas coming from the Inner circle:

It is in this sense that the world is in English. The potential meanings that can be articulated in English are interlinked with the discourses of development, democracy, capitalism, modernization, and so on.

Over the past three centuries, most scientific, medical, industrial, and technological breakthroughs have come from the West. These days, with American technology being extremely influential, “80-85% of all the scientific and technical information available in the world today is either written in or abstracted in English.” (Kaplan 1987: 139) As a result, in an era of mass communications dominated by the West, where leading-edge information and communications technology is largely based in the U.S., countries in the Expanding circle need to know English for international exposure:

The fact that these innovations were pouring out of an English-speaking country meant that those from abroad who wished to learn about them would need to learn English –and learn it well- if they wished to benefit. (Crystal 1997: 72)

Also, the influence of the Internet has played a tremendous role in spreading information and the English language: “Nine out of ten computers connected to the Internet are located in English-speaking countries and more than 80% of all homepages on the web are written in English,” (BBC News 2001: para. 1) Therefore, modernization, despite possible resentment from non-Western people, is closely tied to Westernization and, by extension, to the availability of the English language. Most countries also have little choice but to bring English terms into their own languages to express new technical terms. Nonetheless, no language, of course, can assure the development of a society without adequate political and economic policies drawn by the local governments.

3.2. Education and Career Opportunities

Students in the Expanding circle learn English even though it plays no functional role in their everyday life. Because books of higher education and many doctoral theses are written in English and top research universities are in the US, it is necessary for university students to have a high understanding of written English. In South Korea, early English education is compulsory from the third grade of elementary school and is tested on the university entrance exam. Many parents spend large amounts of money to send their children to language institutes or to study in expensive language programs abroad: “Spending for overseas study hit a record high of \$803 million in the first half this year.” (The Korea Times 2003: para. 5) Not surprisingly, “the English language teaching (E.L.T.) business has become one of the major growth industries around the world in the past thirty years.” (Crystal 1997: 103)

The big push to learn a language is linked to trade. With the internationalization of business, politics, and academics, “English is increasingly used at the university level to equip graduates to function effectively in the global competition for capital and customers.” (Huntington 1996: 63) In Korea, personal experience shows that many students study English primarily for better career opportunities, which is not surprising since “more than four fifths of all international organizations use English as either their main or one of their main operating languages.” (BBC News 2001: para. 2) High scores on several standardized tests such as the TOEIC are also needed just to apply for many jobs.

3.3. Leisure and Entertainment

The presence of English is also felt at many other levels. Advances in transportations have made international travel a reality, and the tourism industry has soared in the past twenty years, with English being the preferred language in use. In Korea, there has been a debate to make English an official language on Cheju Island to promote tourism and attract foreign direct investment. Also, Hollywood movies, international sport, American popular music, newspapers and brands, etc... have an enormous impact in the Expanding circle. Speaking English is not only an academic skill but also a cultural aspect of life associated with American culture and often, as in Korea, with social prestige. However, while exposure to Western culture may contribute to changing the local social attitudes, “entertainment [...] does not equate to cultural conversion. People interpret communications in terms of their own preexisting values and perspectives.” (Huntington 1996: 59) In fact, there has been little controversy associated with the need for English as the language of science and technology in the Expanding circle; most debates have focused on the impact that English is having on the local cultures, in particular in the Outer circle.

4.0. Roles and Impact of English in the Outer Circle

In the Outer circle (India, Malaysia, Singapore, Nigeria, etc...), the English language also fulfills most of the roles it plays as an international language but has additional functions not usually found in the Expanding circle: “The outer or extended circle involves the earlier phases of the spread of English in non-native settings, where the language has become part of the country’s chief institutions.” (Crystal 1997: 54)

4.1. New Languages: Pidgins and Creoles

People in the Outer circle learn English as an additional (or second) language and use oral and vernacular Englishes that are mixtures of Standard English and local languages: “When communities begin to trade with each other, they communicate by adopting a simplified language, known as a pidgin which combines elements from their different languages,” (Crystal 1997: 9) and which can even become a native language (or Creole) for some speakers. Pidgins are used to fulfill narrow and particular functions in a restricted set of domains and, though they have a simplified structure and a smaller vocabulary than fully developed languages, they nevertheless have their own internal rules and logic. Although these polyglossic dialects are unstandardized varieties that often do not have official status, their widespread use indicates that “English is no longer ‘owned’ by its native speakers because acculturation and nativisation processes have produced a

remarkable diversification of the English language into many non-native varieties.” (Phillipson 2001: para. 9)

In multilingual settings, English plays an important ‘second language’ role by serving as a unifying force. The types of Englishes spoken in these contexts should not be considered as inferior varieties of a Standard form. English is simply indigenized, takes on local colorations, and is no longer perceived as the imperial tongue:

“English has been accepted against the grain of national, racial and anti-imperialist emotions because of its convenience and neutrality. A country with a multitude of quarreling tribes or sects needs some common tongue, and it is best that it should be one hat is *hors de combat*” (Derbyshire 2000: para. 4)

The English language then is not neutral in the cultural sense but only in relation to other competing local languages such as in India, where attempts to give Hindi sole status as the national language have failed, and in Nigeria where, for better or for worse, “the principal ingredient of Nigeria’s unification and tempestuous unity is the English language.” (Bisong 1995: 126)

4.2. Indigenous Arts

Several authors (mostly in Western Africa) who are fluent in their mother tongue choose to write in English and are influenced by literary movements and genres derived from already-established Western traditions. Although the emergence of contact literatures in English is best addressed by the writers themselves (Wole Soyinka, for instance), the role which literature plays in the maintenance and development of a culture cannot be neglected. The relationship these authors have with Western languages is very deep since Sub-Saharan Africa never produced a written language and did not have an alphabet before the West imposed the Roman script during the colonial times. It can be argued that “the pull of the Center has been so strong that writers in the Periphery have found it difficult, if not impossible, to do creative work in their mother tongue.” (Phillipson in Bisong 1995: 123) But, as Bisong explains, these authors are also creating new blends of African and Western culture by writing in altered English that suits the African experience and reinforces the emerging cultural values of these societies. Yet, and although writing in English does appeal to a wider audience internationally, if Africans choose not to write in their native tongues and enrich them by so doing, who will?

4.3. Westernization of the Value Systems

Considering how important English is in the Outer circle, English has been called a global threat and the teaching of English a new form of Western colonization:

Since language is the means by which the culture of a people is disseminated, the imposition of English on the Periphery has also meant the imposition of the culture which the language bears.” (Phillipson in Bisong 1995: 127)

Globalization does indeed have a strong Western connotation, understandably so since without the major technological advances that were created in the West there might never have been such a process in the first place: “about half of the influential scientific and technological output in the period between 1750 and 1900 would have been written in

English.” (Crystal 1997: 73) Furthermore, because “throughout history the distribution of languages in the world has reflected the distribution of power in the world” (Huntington 1996: 62), the rise of English as a world language cannot reasonably be described as just “an accident of circumstance.” (Kaplan 1987: 138) Any language *other* than the dominant European language emerging as the global language would have been stunning. It is only in the sense that English is the vehicle of a more advanced technology that it can be called imperialist, although, one can regret, with Kachru (1994), that the relationship between the powerful influence of the Inner circle and the periphery is disproportionately unequal.

The English language has also been described as carrying democratic values due to its structural aspects such as the absence of a system of coding social class differences. Yet the repeated failures of Western-style democracy in several African countries make this statement preposterous. Exposure does not mean conversion, as Huntington (1996: 78) explains: “Non-Western societies can modernize and have modernized without abandoning their own cultures and adopting wholesale Western values, institutions, and practices.” A good example of a country that has used English, but strongly retained its own culture and identity, including little use of Western dress, is India. For the impact of westernization to be beneficial rather than oppressive, every country needs to deal with the English language in a way that fits their situation while (re)asserting their own languages to make their culture thrive.

5.0. Language Planning and the Future of English

In order to do so, language planners determine a suitable place for the English language in society and education. Language planning “refers to all conscious, deliberate efforts to affect the structure and function of language varieties” (Tollefson 1989: 24) and involves various aspects ranging from the selection of a language and the standardization of its form, to the elaboration of its functions and domains of use (work, education, media, law, etc...).

5.1. The Importance of Adequate Language Planning

Language planning is directly related to political issues and national development, especially where English shares official status with another language:

All questions of language control and standardization have major implications for social relations and the distribution of power. (Pennycook in Burns and Coffin 2001: 84)

Like in many African countries after WW2, language “may be a step in the process of asserting the nationhood of a newly independent or established nation” (Holmes 2001: 97). For example, in Tanzania Swahili is now the national and official language, with English being used as a second official language with a reduced influence. In Nigeria and Singapore, where its function is also utilitarian rather than symbolic, English is used for the government documents, law courts, the media, etc... Since insufficient funds are often problematic, it is important to “determine in some fair and realistic way what segment of the population needs to know English, which English, to what level of proficiency and for what social objective.” (Kaplan 1987: 145)

One problem associated with language planning decisions is language death. “Between 3,600 and 5,400 languages, as many of 90% of the world’s total, are threatened with extinction in the next century.” (Pinker 1994: 262) For example, while a single language may be a symbol of the unity of a nation, “African governments are corralling their multilingual populations into speaking just two or three officially approved languages simply for administrative convenience.” (Morrisson 2002: para. 5) This is an intellectual tragedy which is not only caused by the impact of English (or French, in a number of West and Central African countries), and which can only be prevented by establishing wise macro-policy goals while promoting the teaching of indigenous languages. Another possible problem is the appearance of an elite class who use English as a means for excluding the common people from education and social positions and maintaining social and economic inequalities. Nonetheless, numerous instances of language planning have been successful, such as in multi-cultural Singapore, where a four-language structure was adopted with English, Chinese, Tamil and Malay all having equal official status. Although English is the dominant language in actual practice and serves as the working language, it is not expected to be the language of identity for all communities:

English was deliberately chosen to defuse a linguistically explosive situation; the result is a multilingual population demonstrating increasing ethnic integration and a peaceful resolution of a potentially divisive social environment. (Kaplan 1987: 141)

5.2. One English or Many Englishes?

Language planning worldwide will play a crucial role on whether English fragments into several unintelligible local languages. While the mass-communications industry and a uniform standard written English tend to pull the different subtypes together, some remote varieties could become mutually incomprehensible. International English borrows a large number of words from other languages, and, reciprocally, languages mix English with local words, sometimes with their original meaning being distorted:

The vocabulary of ‘World English’ is increasing at a rate of at least 5,000 new words every year [...] The fact is that the English-speaking countries have given up ownership of English. (Crystal in BBC News 2001: *Speed* section , para. 5)

Koreans speak English inserting a lot of ‘Konglish’ expressions (such as ‘otobai’, ‘eye shopping’, ‘Korea team fighting!’, etc...), often to express local concepts in non-standard forms of English. Grammatical forms in English also penetrate foreign languages. Although linguistic imperialism does not seem threatening yet, new mental structures can be imposed through English. Structural hybrids are impacting every language in many subtle ways, like “redundant plurality and non-deletion of subjects” (Kachru 1994: 144) in the Korean language.

Nevertheless, intelligibility matters, and “the more distant the local variety becomes from the some metropolitan model, the less useful that variety is as a language of science and technology.” (Kaplan 1987: 145) This is why in Singapore the government refuses to promote Singapore English (‘Singlish’), which could be used as a marker of national identity and unity, and still endorses British English as the target variety in schools. Amidst such diversity, Crystal (in Burns 2001: 58) suggests that a World Standard Spoken English [...] a regionally neutral international spoken standard, acting as a stabilizing

force on global diversity,” could emerge in the future.

5.3. Is the English Language Threatened?

While the English language is being used in many ways across the globe, it also faces dangers. As an international language, it is quite possible that, if Western economies collapse, there will be little need for English. Yet it does have such an immensely strong base that it could outlive the strength of the US economic and military power, just as Latin survived the fall of Rome by a thousand years. Also, in Hong Kong for example, where English was left behind through imperialism, a process of rejection is already visible, according to Fox (2001: para.28):

“The people of Hong Kong never truly adopted a British mindset, and neither do they see themselves as Chinese. [...] recent surveys revealed a strong dislike among students for the study of English.”

Even India, “often cited as the one nation where English is an indispensable medium of exchange between a myriad of sects and races, is slipping the leash” (Derbyshire 2000: para. 5) in favor of various forms of Hindi. Nonetheless, one can speculate that, unless computer translation becomes a viable reality, English will remain the language of trade, science and technology for a long time.

As for the future of English sustaining the inner circle cultures, it will continue to exist as long as native speakers of English continue to exist. The matter is particularly topical as hundreds of thousand of immigrants pour into English-speaking countries such as the US or England, countries where English is not an official language. As “2.3% of native-born Americans now do not speak English ‘very well’” (Brimelow 1995: 8), a heated debate has begun in the US to legally make English the only official language. Finally, the proportion of native speakers of English is declining relatively to other languages: 9.8% in 1958, only 7.6% in 1992 (Huntington 1996: 60).

6.0. Implications for Teaching English

Language planning, especially micro-implementation decisions related to input and learner variables, has an important influence in the setting of guidelines and priorities in the education system. The variety of the new Englishes and their numerous functions challenge the ways in which English is currently taught.

6.1. Sensitivity to Cultural Differences

As Holmes (2001: 275) points out,

“Learning another language usually involves a great deal more than learning the literal meaning of the words, how to put them together, how to pronounce them. We need to know what they mean in the cultural context in which they are normally used. And that involves some understanding of the cultural and social norms of their users.”

Culture may be used as a tool for understanding the key concepts of the language in order to increase communicative competence, or as an end in itself by studying the institutions, art, customs, etc... of a country. Topics exposing the language through Western authentic

materials should be carefully chosen as some could be inappropriate and alienating in certain contexts. Cultural concepts should be introduced smoothly to enhance the students' language skills and foster understanding while showing respect for the students' first language and cultural background, especially in cases of large social distance.

Teaching methods should also be evaluated so that they suit the local contexts. Not only do many textbooks come from the West, but so do language teaching methodologies. Teaching styles that involve student-centered activities and discussions could be difficult for Asian students used to teacher-centered experiences, although they seem to be well-received in Korea. Some sensitivity and flexibility, such as blending the two extremes, should help make these new approaches beneficial. Learner goals have also changed:

English as a Lingua Franca is, by definition, a pidgin. It is a third language used as a communicative bridge between those who do not share a common first language. A common feature of pidgins is their simplification and regularisation of both lexis and grammar. (Hill 2003: para. 4)

Consequently, systematic error correction or the use of idiomatic expressions might not be worth focusing on, especially if errors do not interfere with the meaning.

6.2. What Kind of English to Teach?

The English language is being used in so many new ways that it is hard for teachers to keep up with the changes. The kind of English to teach is an important issue now that English has become global. Since the number of non-native speakers is substantially larger than its native speakers (about 4:1), students should be made aware of the different varieties that they will likely encounter with non-native interlocutors. This reduces the value of the standard forms of British and American English, although Koreans, for example, still have a clear preference for American English. In the expanding circle, topics could involve international situations. For example, in Morocco,

if learners have occasion to use English at all in adult life, it is at least as likely to be with other foreign-language speakers of English as with native or second-language speakers [...] this communication is likeliest to take place in Morocco itself, to a lesser extent in various non-Anglophone countries, and only for a small minority of Moroccans, in the USA. (Adaskou 1990: 7)

In the outer circle, materials written or spoken by non-natives, could be included, such as local literatures, with topics and cultural input being drawn from local situations, especially for listening comprehension. Finally, teaching an international language raises the question as to who will teach it and could blur the distinction between native and non-native teachers as models of the language, even if Standard British and American English remain essential for intelligibility across the globe.

7.0. Conclusion

The world needed a global language, and English, by acquiring a wide array of functions, satisfied this need and is now the world's way of communicating interculturally. Overall the impact on local cultures has been mostly positive, and English is not any more

imperialist than any other international language would be. With possibly half the world 'competent' by 2050, it will be up to every country, including countries in the inner circle, to make adequate choices so that English can sustain development and speed up modernization. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that "even if one third of the world is now regularly exposed to English, this still means that two thirds are not." (Crystal 1996: 96) The average Korean is hardly capable of saying more than a few basic sentences in English. Finally, it is also essential to preserve linguistic and cultural diversity, if just for the potential range of human thought and creativity it contains, and because cultural maintenance across generations is best performed by the local language:

A lingua franca is a way of coping with linguistic and cultural differences, not a way of eliminating them. It is a tool for communication not a source of identity and community. (Huntington 1996: 61)

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