

LANGUAGE POLICY BEYOND BORDERS

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Abstract. *The present paper discusses the spread of English as a global language. Studying the main factors that stand behind English transcendence of national borders, the paper presents various clues from sciences, technology, economics and politics. It aims to prove that English spread all around the world is merely a matter of language natural evolution and not the result of any structured conspiracy or linguistic imperialism as some may argue.*

Keywords: *Language policy, English, linguistic imperialism, linguistic evolution, globalisation, Americanisation.*

Introduction

The last century knew various political, economic and social changes that have affected the structure of the world. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the destruction of the communist pole and the rise of the United States of America as the new powerful model in economy, culture, politics and scientific research have influenced not only nations' lives but also the way they communicate with each other. State borders start to disappear due to the birth of a big national world with common characteristics that transcend local, indigenous ones. These incidents, in fact, open the gates for English, a language with a powerful navy and army of its own, to play the role of the international *lingua franca*; for it reaches an advanced status in the globe and therefore becomes a world-wide language.

It is, nowadays, the language that a tourist, in any part of the world, may use to search out a missing hotel; the language that any scientific researcher may choose to defend the results of his research in an international scientific conference; and the language that any lost pilot may use to get help from the aeroplane station of a foreign country; it is, indeed, "the language on which the sun has never set" (Crystal: 1997)¹.

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¹ David Crystal (1997), *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge University Press, p. 75.

This rapid and wide spread of English is considered by many politicians and linguists as non-innocent. Phillipson and Skutnab-Kngas (1999)² consider it as a form of linguistic imperialism which results out of a planned conspiracy and a brilliant pre-defined language management.

Phillipson (1992), for instance, states that the development of English at the expense of other local languages is not an accident, but rather the result of a well-organised work of a huge number of US and UK teaching agencies, councils, Peace Corps and nongovernmental organisations. He adds that English is used as an imperialistic tool by which “the powerful western countries,” that is USA and UK, control “the underdeveloped societies.”³

To justify his idea, Phillipson, as stated by Spolsky (2004), uses the argument “to find out who is responsible for a situation, ask who benefits.”⁴ However, this theory of linguistic conspiracy receives a wave of criticism from linguists who regard English spread as a natural matter of language evolution (Spolsky, 2004; Ricento, 2006; Ferguson, 2006; Wright, 2004; Crystal, 1997). Spolsky (2004), for instance, states that the spread of English and its development as the first genuine global language appeared to result rather from its being in place to take advantage of changes in the world language system over the past century. This changes not so much linguistic as economic, technological, political, social, religious and structural, are where we need to look for underlying causes.⁵

This means that the spread of English as an international language is only a question of natural development that coincides with the new changes in the world economic, political and social system, rather than the effects of any prepared language policy or linguistic conspiracy. Based on this hypothesis, which seems more logical and convincing, the present paper attempts to study the main factors which contribute to the promotion of English to the status of an international language.

Factors of English spread

With the rise of the US during the twentieth century, English becomes a model and a medium which all countries start to follow so as to benefit from the US development. The following discussion provides an overview of the role of military, scientific, economic, political and cultural factors in spreading English in the world.

Military cooperation

The US military interventions and cooperation with its allies in different parts of the world facilitate the spread of English. Its military cooperation with the

² Robert Phillipson and Skutnab-Kangas (1999), ‘Englishisation: one dimension of globalisation’, in Graddol, D. and U. Meinhof (eds), *English in a Changing World*, AILA Review.

³ Robert Phillipson (1992), *Linguistic Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 52

⁴ Bernard Spolsky (2004), *Language Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 79.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 90.

new Iraqi government after the demise of Saddam Husain's regime in 2003, for instance, plays a crucial role in the development of English among Iraqi people.

Moreover, the increase of the collaboration between the US forces and the countries of the Gulf to enhance security leads the latter to include English in their educational curricula and foster its spread among their citizens. It goes without saying that the influence of the 9/11 attacks and US so-called global war on terror have stimulated people to read more about American values and mode of thinking and this helps English to be the most important source of information in the world.

The US scientific research and technology

After the Second World War, the world knew a shift of dominance in scientific research from Germany to USA. This shift, in fact, is also reflected in languages, as English replaces German, which was for a long time the dominant language of scientific research. The US development in electronic technologies such as computer and internet marks a real turning-point in all nations' communications.

What is more, the progress it realises in space inventions, military and civil industrialization, biology, chemistry, astrology, medicine and human sciences research makes it a leading power in the world. In the core of these developments of scientific research, English becomes the main language of publication and scientific meetings because it dominates all scientific journals and international debates. Wright (2004) states that when we come to the medium in which the flows of information on cutting-edge science take place, then English does dominate exclusively and in every sphere. The research community has come to inform itself, debate and publish in English, even where the innovation originated in other speech communities.⁶

This interest in English as a language of scientific research enhances the number of English publishers. According to Ammon (2003, cited in Ferguson, 2006)⁷, the Anglo-Saxon bibliographic data bases records that 87.2% of publications in natural sciences and 82.5% of publications in social sciences in 1995 were in English.

Economy

It is widely accepted that the spread of a language of a nation coincides with the increase in its exportation of material products. This is what exactly happens to English, whose link to the material benefits eases its diffusion in many parts of the world.

The US strong economy reaches all the markets of the globe with its powerful, industrial companies such as Microsoft, Coca Kola, Disney and Mc Donald's. The boom that the US economy knows before the last financial crisis facilitates its

⁶ Sue Wright (2004), *Language Policy and Language Planning*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 151.

⁷ Gibson Ferguson (2006), *Language Planning and Education*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 112.

invasion of the largest markets of the world. It leads to its control of the world economy with a GDP of about 10.383 (Ferguson, 2006)⁸. Besides, the US also dominates the world economy ideologically (Wright, 2004)⁹.

The existence of organisations such as the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the Organisation for Economic Corporation and Development (OECD) in the USA offers it a sort of ideological control of the world.

Needless to say, globalization implicitly serves to foster the US capitalist and new liberal model of economy all over the world. This dominance plays an important role in giving English a pre-eminent position within the linguistic market of the world. English becomes a main medium of communication and business trade even between non-English speaking countries. It also becomes a tool of commercial advertising, and nowadays one may find it in panels of small shops of cities as remote as Seoul. In short, the global spread of American economy enables the flow of English all around the globe.

Policy

The US has many effects on the political sphere of the world. Being a strong and permanent member of the UN, the US government keeps itself as an observer of peace in the world. Its diplomacy during the First and Second World Wars enables it to gain a huge number of allies throughout the world, a fact which explains its political dominance of the globe.

Furthermore, the current anti-terrorism war that the US was and is still waging in Iraq and Afghanistan, together with its participation in many political conflicts in the world (e.g. Morocco vs Algeria; Russia vs Georgia; South Korea vs North Korea; Israel vs Palestine) makes it the centre of political resolutions. To put it clearly, this hegemony of the US policy paves the way for English to spread as a *lingua franca* in international political meetings.

Today, English dominates the largest organizations and unions such as the EU and NATO. It also becomes the “language that predominates in the international courts and war crimes tribunals” (Wright, 2004)¹⁰. It supplants French in European meetings and becomes the preferred language for the majority of the European heads of states despite the objections of some officials particularly from French and Spanish governments.

Media and culture

It has often been said that media is an important mechanism to diffuse language, culture and ideology. In fact, this truism reflects the case of the American and British media which play a crucial role in fostering English and the Anglo-Saxon culture all over the world. The US and UK possess the largest

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 111.

⁹ Sue Wright, *op. cit.*, (2004), p. 146.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 150.

news networks such as Reuters and Dow Jones (Wright, 2004)¹¹. These two English channels of Business news are considered the largest source of information providing all world channels with exclusive news.

Newspapers, tabloids, pamphlets and magazines also represent a crucial means for the spread of US propaganda and for the empowerment of English at the international level.

The Times, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sun Says*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Gazette*, the *News Week*, the *Observer*, etc., are being widely read in English all over the world. Further, the last decade witnesses the emergence of new English electronic journals that start to replace print press due to their easiness and quickness in news diffusion.

Also, Television plays an important part in disseminating American ideas and expanding the usage of English around the globe. The Anglo-Saxon channels such as BBC, Fox and CNN are paramount tools for the penetration of English to non-English speaking countries.

Further, the success that the US has enjoyed in cinema, theatre and music since the First World War makes it a cultural power that dominates the world. Since the invention of TV, Hollywood offers the world with a remarkable number of movies in English. These English movies dominate the world box-offices; for it is hardly to find a cinema or a channel that does not present English films in its top ten lists. Moreover, English films indisputably dominate the Oscar programs and all film festivals. This hegemony of the US films gives English a green light to flourish all over the world.

Additionally, the US also controls satellites TV with its cartoon networks series, which gains a wide popularity among children. Cartoons like Wolf-Disney and Tom & Jerry seem to be of critical importance for children's adoption of the American culture and language. The US theatre also represents a good tool for English spread. English drama is today played in many parts of the world. This may also be said about the English opera which is now heard in theatres of cities as remote as Beirut.

Likewise, music undeniably gains the lion's share in representing and spreading the Anglo-Saxon culture and language around the globe. Songs of celebrities such as Michael Jackson, Elvis Presley, Madonna, Whitney Winston, Britney Spears, Akon (USA), Bob Marley (Jamaica), Beatles, Elton John, Amy McDonald (UK) are today broadcasted in all music channels of the world. They dominate top tens of music programs in nearly all channels and websites. All these cultural issues have a huge influence on local cultures, behaviours and languages. They represent, indeed, a real Americanisation of the world. They transcend all frontiers through globalisation and create a class of persons, black or yellow in colour but English in taste and intellect. They shape personalities and languages of young generations according to the principles of the Anglo-Saxon model; a fact which rises many questions about the changes that the world has known since the growth of the US following the Second World War.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 146.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, one may infer that English spread throughout the world is the result of a natural language evolution which coincides with a change in the world linguistic ecology. This change, though led by a powerful country, the United States of America, has nothing to do with a conspiracy theory or a brilliant language policy as some researchers hypothesise. It is rather the outcome of a normal language development that goes hand in hand with the political, technological, scientific, economic, and cultural progress that the world has known since the rise of the US after the Second World War. This idea, in fact, is also supported by some researchers such as Crystal (1967), Ferguson (2006), Spolsky (2004), who state that English, like any other language, naturally spread by the increase of the domains of its use.

Yet, the question to be raised is whether this widespread of English will keep up with the natural evolution of Chinese, a highly competitive language, that starts to gain ground all over the world with the economic, social and political progress of China.

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