

Necessity For A Global *Lingua Franca* And English: A Fine Balance

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Abstract

There is a close link between language dominance and cultural power. Without a strong power-base, whether political, military or economic, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication. Language does not have an independent existence. It does not exist in some sort of mystical space apart from the people who speak it. Language exists only in the brains, mouths, ears, hands and eyes of its users. When the users of a particular language succeed on the international stage, their language succeeds. When they fail, their language fails. A language becomes a global language not simply because of its intrinsic structural properties, or because of the size of its vocabulary. It does not become a world language either because it has been a vehicle of a great literature in the past or because it was once associated with a great culture or religion. These are all factors, which can motivate someone to learn a language, but none of them alone, or in combination, can ensure a language's expansion. A language becomes an international language for two chief reasons: the political power of its people, especially their military might and an economic power to maintain and expand it. The consolidation of English language now, as a matter of fact, is in the right place and at the right time. The present paper discusses the factors which necessitate English language to consolidate its position to occupy the space of 'global lingua franca' in the new globalised world order.

Keywords: Communication, language, globalization, military might, economic power.

There are several brands of globalization and each country may choose the one, which suits it most. The brand that suits creates a balance between tradition and modernism. In the modern context, globalization is a recent phenomenon, only about three decades old. However, as concept and inherent philosophy, it is as old as the origin of life. In non-technical words, globalization means sharing, caring, co-operation, partnership, togetherness and belongingness. It rests on inter-dependence, mutuality and friendliness. In a global society, people sail and sink in togetherness. The expansion of trade and commerce and advancements in transport and communication accelerate the trend of globalization.

Historically speaking, globalization is an Indian concept. A hymn in the Vedas defines it as *Vashudhaiv Kutumbhum*, meaning that the world is one family. The old Tamil poem *Kural* by Thiru Valluvar refers to the whole world as a village. Swami Vivekananda's Vedanta is global in its content and core. The new world order which he visualized was based on the concept of '*Jiva is Shiva*' i.e. all human beings are equal and that a happy amalgam of the best of East and West would make the world a better place to live and contemplate. "I want you to make European society with India's religion," he told his American disciples (Khullar, *Employment News*, 29th January – 4th February, 2005). This new world order is something, which cannot be imagined and possible without communication.

The primary means of communication among the masses of the world is language. It is a species-specific and species-uniform possession of humankind. According to a well-known linguist, Frank Palmer, "One of the main differences between human beings and animals is our ability to speak. Man is a speaking animal, *homo loquens*, and this ability has greatly enhanced and facilitated our advancement in all spheres". At present, mankind uses 6,809 living languages and about 100 living scripts to facilitate its social interactions (Anil Sarwal, *University Today*, 1 January, 2005). However, there is an urgent need for the adoption of a *lingua franca* in a world in which all its people are quickly becoming interdependent despite the many differences of their myriad cultures, races, religions and ideologies.

The *planetization of humankind* is almost complete due to the effects of recent dramatic advancements in transport and communication. Communication has been greatly improved by the widespread adoption of mass media, especially radio and television, coupled with reduced costs and time that has been made possible by the use of satellites, computers and mobile phones. The internet is quickly emerging as the preferred information highway to meet our daily communication needs as well as for conducting important business transactions. David Crystal, the most influential linguist of our times, in fact, feels that the arrival of electronic communication is a milestone in the history of language, as weighty as the discovery of speech or the invention of language. Without knowing a common world language, it is now almost impossible for us to participate fully in the global village where we live in. The common link language that would be the universally accepted means of communication, however, should not be allowed to undermine the importance of any other existing language or culture. In fact, new linguistic insights have made us aware that no human language is superior to any other and that the development and growth of a language depend upon its use.

On the question of the significance of a global language, David Crystal, a world authority on the English language, states that 'a language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country' (Crystal 1997:2). Such a role will be

most evident in countries where large numbers of the people speak the language as a mother tongue. In the case of English, for instance, this would mean the U.S.A, Britain, Canada, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and several Caribbean countries. However, no language has ever been spoken by a mother-tongue majority in more than a few countries (Spanish leads, in this respect, in some twenty countries, chiefly in Latin America). Therefore, mother-tongue use by itself cannot give a language global status. To achieve such a status, a language has to be taken up by other countries around the world. They must decide to give it a special place within their communities, even though they may have few mother-tongue speakers. This can be done in two main directions. Firstly, a language can be made the official language of a country, to be used as a medium of communication in such domains as administration, the law courts, the media, and the educational system. To get on in these societies, it is essential to master the official language as early in life as possible. Such a language is often described as a second language because it is seen as a complement to a person's mother tongue. The role of an official language is today best illustrated by English, which now has some kind of special status in over seventy countries, such as India, Nigeria, Ghana and Singapore. Secondly, a language can be made a priority in a country's foreign-language teaching, even though this language has no official status. It becomes the language which children are most likely to be taught when they arrive in school, and the one most available to adults who, for whatever reason, never learnt it, or learnt it badly, in their early educational years. Russian, for example, held privileged status for many years among the countries of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Mandarin Chinese continues to play an important role in South-East Asia. However, English is now the language most widely taught as a foreign language, in over 100 countries, such as Russia, China, Germany, Spain and Brazil. In most of these countries, it is emerging as the chief foreign language to be encountered in schools, often displacing other languages in the process.

The question 'why a language becomes a global language?' has little to do with the number of people who speak it. It is much more to do with who those speakers are. Latin, for example, became an international language throughout the Roman Empire, but it was not because the Romans were more numerous than the people they subjugated. They were simply more powerful. Moreover, when Roman military power declined, Latin remained for a millennium as the international language of education, but it was due to the prevalence of a different sort of power - the ecclesiastical power of Roman Catholicism.

There is a close connection between language dominance and cultural power. Without a strong power-base, whether political, military or economic, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication. Language does not have an independent existence. It does not exist in some sort of mystical space apart from the people who speak it. Language exists only in the brains, mouths, ears, hands and eyes of its users. When they succeed on the

international stage, their language succeeds. When they fail, their language fails. A language becomes a global language not simply because of its intrinsic structural properties, or because of the size of its vocabulary. It does not become a world language either because it has been a vehicle of a great literature in the past or because it was once associated with a great culture or religion. These are all factors, which can motivate someone to learn a language, but none of them alone, or in combination, can ensure a language's expansion. Indeed, such factors cannot even guarantee survival as a living language as it is clear from the case of Latin, learnt today as a classical language by only a scholarly and religious few. To be more precise, a language becomes an international language for one chief reason: the political power of its people, especially their military power. The history of a global language can be traced through the successful expeditions of its soldier/sailor speakers and the examples of Greek in the Middle East, Latin in Europe, Arabic across Northern Africa and the Middle East and Spanish, Portuguese, and French in America, Africa and the Far-East can be cited as examples to prove it. English has been no exception.

Another, often paradoxical, argument can be put forward here that international language dominance is not solely the result of military might. It may take a militarily powerful nation to establish a language, but it takes an economically powerful one to maintain and expand it. This has always been the case, but it became a particularly critical factor early in the twentieth century, with economic developments beginning to operate on a global scale, supported by the new communication technologies - telegraph, telephone, radio, and computer and fostering the emergence of large-scale multinational organizations. The growth of competitive industry and business brought an explosion of international marketing and advertising. The power of the press and technology in the form of movies and records propelled new mass entertainment industries, which had a worldwide/global impact. The drive to make progress in science and technology fostered an international, intellectual and research environment, which gave scholarship and further education a high profile.

Any language at the centre of such an explosion of international activity would suddenly have found itself with a global status. Moreover, the consolidation of English now, as a matter of fact, is in the right place at the right time. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain had become the world's leading industrial and trading country. By the end of the century, the population of the U.S.A. (then approaching 100 million) was larger than that of any of the countries of Western Europe, and its economy was the most productive and the fastest growing in the world. British political imperialism also had sent English around the globe so that it become 'a language on which the sun never sets'. During the twentieth century, the world presence of English has been consolidated, enhanced, and maintained by the economic supremacy of the new American superpower, almost single-handedly. Moreover, the language

behind the US dollar was English and more significantly, this legacy continues in the twenty-first century.

English is one of the major world languages now. It requires an effort of the imagination to realize that this is a relatively recent thing. Shakespeare, for instance, wrote for a speech community of only a few millions, whose language was not much valued elsewhere in Europe. Shakespeare's language was pretty well confined to England and southern Scotland, not yet having penetrated very much into Ireland or even Wales, let alone into the world beyond. In the first place, the great expansion in the number of English speakers was due to the growth of population in England itself.

At the time of the Norman Conquest, the population in England was, perhaps, a million and a half. It was approaching six million in 1700, and nine million in 1800. Then, with the industrial revolution in full flow, the population expanded rapidly to seventeen million in 1850, and over thirty million by 1900. By the year 2000 the population of England crossed over 59,280,00 (Langton 2004). If we look at the global stage, there are more than 1.2 billion people speaking English today, out of which more than 350 million are native speakers and 850 million are speakers who speak it as a second language.

English has become a world language because of its wide diffusion outside the British Isles, to all continents of the world, by trade, colonization and imperialism/conquest. The process began with English settlements in North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. English settlements in the West Indies also began in the seventeenth century, in competition with Spanish, French and Dutch colonizers. British domination of the Indian sub-continent dates from the second half of the eighteenth century: the East India Company was founded in 1600, and British trading post established. British settlement in Australia began slightly later, after the American War of Independence.

The expansion of British influence and power continued at an even greater rate during the nineteenth century. Early in the century, the British displaced the Dutch as the dominant power in South Africa and during the first half of the century British rule was also established in Singapore, British Guiana, New Zealand, and Hong Kong. The second half of the century was marked by the 'scramble for Africa' in which colonial powers completed for possessions in the African continent. As a result, British rule was established in regions of West Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa (Barber 1993).

The worldwide expansion of English means that it is now one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, with well over four hundred million native speakers, and roughly, the

same number who speak it as a second language. The method of its spread, however, also means that there are now many varieties of English, and it is used for many different purposes in varying social contexts. While in some areas, English is used as the first language with slight variations, in many other areas it has become a second language, used alongside one or more local languages for public purposes, and often for communication between different language-groups in the community. India, for instance, has a population of above 130 crores, and over two hundred different languages. English is one of the official languages, alongside Hindi and some other recognized regional languages, and is widely used as a language of administration and commerce. In former British colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa, English usually plays a similar role, whether it is recognized as an official language or not. In Nigeria, the most populous of Black African countries, there are three main languages (*Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa*), and over four hundred local ones, but English is also an official language and plays a major role in government and administration. It is also used as a language of wider communication, at any rate among the higher socio-economic groups.

The present day world status of English is primarily the result of two factors: firstly the expansion of British colonial power, which peaked towards the end of the nineteenth century, and secondly, the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the twentieth century. It is the latter factor that continues to explain the world position of English language today. The USA has nearly 70 percent of all English mother-tongue speakers in the world excluding creole varieties (Crystal 1997: 53). Such dominance, with its political and economic underpinnings, currently gives the Americans a controlling interest in the way the language is likely to develop. To clarify the matter more in detail of how English has been expanded worldwide, it can be mentioned that this language is no longer only of concern to those who have emigrated to North America or the antipodes. It is now entrenched worldwide, as a result of British imperialism, international interdependence, revolutions in information technology, communications and commerce, and because English is the language of the USA, a major economic, political, and military power in the contemporary world.

The Indian-American linguist Braj Kachru (1983) has suggested the spread of English around the world in three concentric circles, representing different ways in which the language has been acquired and is currently used (see fig.1):

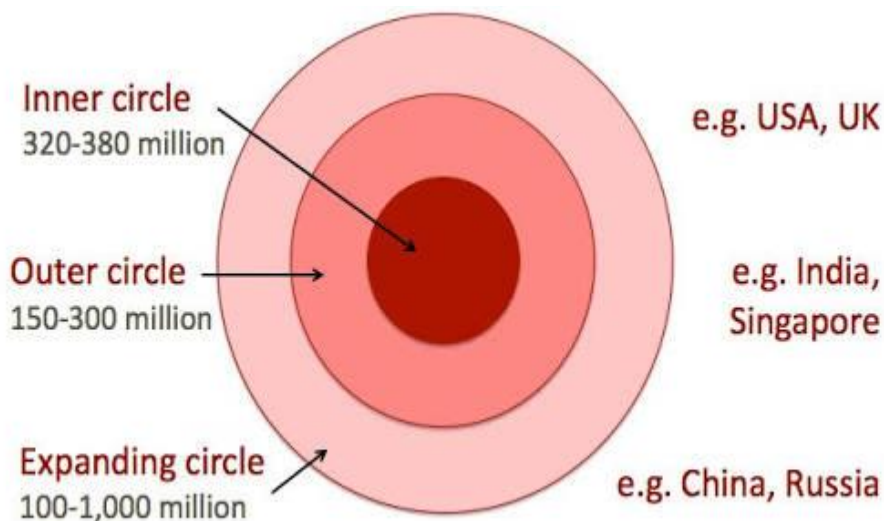


Fig.1. Three Circles of English

The *inner circle* or core English-speaking countries refer to the traditional bases of English, where it is the primary language. This group covers Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia, Ireland and New Zealand. All these are countries in which the dominant groups are native speakers of English. Indeed, these Countries are often thought of as exclusively English speaking, despite the linguistic diversity within their borders. As the ancestors of the dominant group came from Europe, such countries can be described as ‘Europeanized societies’ (Mullard, 1985). The *outer circle* involves the earlier phases of the spread of English in non-native settings, where the language has become part of a country’s chief institutions and plays an important ‘second language’ role in a multilingual setting. It includes countries like India, Singapore, Malaysia, and Nigeria and over fifty other territories. The *expanding circle* does not involve those nations, which recognize the importance of English as an international language, do not have a history of colonization by members of the inner circle, nor have they given English any special administrative status. It includes Russia, China, Japan, and a steadily increasing number of other states. In these areas, English is taught as a foreign language.

A distinction has usually been made between English as a second language and English as a foreign language. For instance, a German or a French learning English learns it as a foreign language. It will not be used for communicating with other Germans or Norwegians, but only with foreigners. Moreover, there is no native tradition of English-speaking in Germany or France, and the learner will usually be taught either standard British English or standard American English. However, an Indian learns English as a second language. He will expect to use it for communication with other Indians, and will hear it used in the speech community as a

matter of course. Moreover, an Indian will most often learn a local variety of the language, taught by an Indian who speaks that variety (Barber, 1993: 238).

Whereas it is estimated that 400 years ago there were between five and seven million speakers of English, the number of native speakers of English now remains constant at about 315 million. The number of users of English as a second or foreign language is increasing dramatically: these are estimated at 300 and 100 million people respectively (Crystal, 1985:7). Such guesstimates are inevitably based on a loose definition of proficiency, and much higher figures are sometimes quoted. English has also become a *lingua franca* to the point that any literate educated person is really deprived if he does not know English. On the global reach of English, an influential editor of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Burchfield, comments: poverty, famine, and disease are instantly recognized as the cruelest and least excusable forms of deprivation. Linguistic deprivation is a less easily noticed condition, but one nevertheless of great significance (Burchfield, 1985:160). This comment seems to equate linguistic deprivation with ignorance of English. However, while there is a sense in which Burchfield is making a valid observation, as an unqualified generalization, it is patently false because there are many millions of highly literate people in the world who are happily and quite justifiably ignorant of English.

At present, English, to a much greater extent than any other language, is the language in which the fate of most of the world's millions is decided. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, English has become the international language *par excellence*. This language has a dominant position in science, technology, medicine, and computers; in research, books, periodicals, and software; in diplomacy and international organizations; in mass media, entertainment, news agencies, and journalism; in youth culture and sports; and in education systems, as the most widely learnt foreign language. This non-exhaustive list of the domains in which English has a dominant, though not of course exclusive place, is indicative of the functional load carried by English. Whereas in earlier historical periods, other languages (like Greek, Latin, Arabic) have spread over large areas for certain purposes (often commercial or religious). The spread of English is unique, both in terms of its geographical reach and as regards the depth of its way, as is the modern use of computers. When the amount of information needing to be processed came to exceed human capabilities, the computer appeared on the scene, transforming the process of planning and calculation. When the need for global communication came to exceed the limits set by language barriers, the spread of English accelerated, transforming existing patterns of international communication. It has been promoted successfully, and has been eagerly adopted in the global linguistic market place.

The demand for English is articulated not only by partisan Anglo-Americans but also by leaders in all parts of the world. They recognize that English is the medium of a great deal of the

world's knowledge, especially in such areas as science and technology. Moreover, access to knowledge is the business of education. When one investigates why so many nations have in recent years made English an official or chosen it as their chief foreign language in schools, one of the most important reasons is always educational, in the broadcast sense. Thirty years back Black South African writer Harry Mashabela, writing in 1975, and laying emphasis on the importance of English, put it:

“Learning and using English will not only give us the much-needed unifying chord but will also land us into the existing world of ideas; it will enable us to keep company with kings in the world of ideas and also make it possible for us to share the experiences of our own brothers in the world....”(Crystal, 1997:101).

Roughly three decades later, India's then Minister of Information Technology and Communications, Pramod Mahajan, in a meeting held in Bangalore to welcome the visiting British Prime Minister Tony Blair, was reported to have said: “We are also grateful..... to the British for ruling India and teaching us English, a fact the Chinese are repenting now” (*The Hindu Online*, January 6, 2002). Assertions like these only show that not everyone has viewed the arrival of the language always in a positive light, but dominant view is certainly that a person is more likely to be in touch with the latest thinking and research in a subject by learning English than by learning any other languages.

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