

## **GLOBALISATION AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

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In the very beginning of his famous work A Tale of Two Cities, the novelist Charles Dickens describes the period in which he sets his story in this way: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way.'

In the spirit of making informed predictions about the future, it may well be that the Dickensian author of the year 2101, looking back to the first quarter of the 21st century, would have this to contribute: 'It was the generation that celebrated diversity<sub>1</sub> it was the generation that promoted conformity.' And the same writer, in describing the past century as a whole, may be able to add to the list of apparent contradictions yet another paradox: 'It was the century that nurtured a thousand languages, it was the century that instituted a world language.'

All the current trends indicate that there is increasing acceptance that a world language is desirable and that the front-runner by far is the English Language. Why is such a world language desirable, indeed necessary? The answer can be summed up in one word: globalisation, that is, the probably irreversible trend for citizens of the world to regard themselves as living in an interconnected and interdependent global village.

Interdependence and interconnectedness seem to be the driving forces behind today's search for a world language. But the attempt to promote a world language is not new. Every world power in history that acquired its empire through military conquest strove to impose the imperialist language on the conquered peoples, sometimes with astonishing success. But there are also more civilized attempts to create an international language in response to the enlightened awareness that an increasingly connected world requires a common language to facilitate the communicative needs of those engaged in a variety of international activities and projects. One such attempt is Esperanto, an artificial language created in 1887 in the hope that its neutrality would enable it to gain widespread acceptance. However, in its latest assessment of its current status, the Universal Esperanto Association acknowledged that the spread of this neutral language could not match the overwhelming strides that English has made this century and indeed all indications are that this trend will escalate in the next.

What then has contributed to the success of English in spite of accusations often leveled at the core English-speaking countries that they are engaged in a conspiracy to maintain their dominance in world affairs through cultural and linguistic imperialism? On the one hand, the spread of English appears to be due to a curious mix of blatant self-interest and a disinterested, altruistic attempt to contribute towards raising the quality of life on the part of governments and

individuals in the core English-speaking countries. On the other hand, the pragmatics of globalisation appears to be succeeding in overcoming local hostility to an alien language on the part of an increasing number of nations where English is a second or foreign language.

Let me give you an example from Malaysia. Recently, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, speaking to a large group of university students, had this to say, "... Some people cannot differentiate between symbolic nationalism and real nationalism. Real nationalism means you must be prepared to do everything possible for your country. If it means learning English, you will learn English. If it means learning Russian, by all means, learn Russian." He went on to declare that English had become a universal language and is not the language of the English people anymore. It is significant that this speech was made just before national elections were held. Even 15 years ago such a statement would have been political suicide. Today, however, there is general acceptance that he is merely being realistic and practical. And this attitude towards English is being adopted by an increasing number of countries.

In order to account for this remarkable spread of English, sociolinguists will describe how England, a small country on an island somewhat isolated from the rest of Europe, became the world's greatest colonial and commercial power in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with possessions so spread out in the world that "the sun never set on the British Empire." They will describe how, in all the colonies in Asia and Africa, the English Language was established as the official language of the administration and medium of instruction in schools. They will go on to describe how English-speaking people migrated in such large numbers to America, Australia and New Zealand so that these lands eventually became independent English-speaking nations. They will then describe how the ebbing of England as a world power, which logically would have also seen the decline of the language, was compensated by the rise of the United States, also an English speaking country, as a superpower in both military and economic terms.

In addition, the sociolinguists will point out how the core English-speaking countries accepted large numbers of foreign students to the numerous universities and colleges that these countries established and how these foreign graduates returned to their home countries to become leaders who continued to promote the use of English. They will also point out that in this age of Information Technology, 80% of Internet communication is currently in English. They will talk too of the influence of jazz and popular songs in English as well as the impact of English movies. And finally, they will describe the establishment of a multi-billion dollar industry known as TESL/TEFL devoted to the teaching of English to non-native speakers and how so many universities and training colleges throughout the world offer courses on the teaching and learning of English.

Judging by the trends I have just outlined, the Dickensian writer of the year 2101 may therefore with confidence declare the 21st century as the century that instituted a world language.

But would he, with equal confidence, be able to declare the century as one that 'nurtured a thousand languages'?

Globalisation seems to be more able to spontaneously release the will and the energy to create a common, uniform culture. All we have to do is look at international airports and hotels to see how such a culture has in large part already evolved. If a single language is selected as the language for international communications, it will be because we, the citizens of the world, value this arrangement. But this linguistic dominance by one language, or for that matter by a few languages, will inevitably result in the creation of at least two serious predicaments brought about by the success of the very condition we value so highly.

The first predicament is the likelihood of what has been termed 'linguistic genocide' or the 'killing' of other smaller languages in the world. The Universal Esperanto Association cites research that indicates that the number of languages used in the world will be halved in the next 50 years because of widespread use of English and warns that such a phenomenon will be 'a cultural loss for the whole world.' I personally feel that the danger is real but the spread of English should not be singled out as the main culprit in the demise of minority languages. It seems to me that it is English working in tandem with other major national languages that has such a devastating effect.

Today, many languages spoken by minority groups within a country are disappearing because most governments are more concerned with developing their official and national languages for administrative, educational and inter-ethnic communications within their respective countries. For instance, in the states of Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia, there are many local communities with their own languages. But the education system concentrates on Malay, English and Chinese and has made provisions for the teaching of one major local language in each state, that is, Iban and Kadazan. There is no provision for the development of all the other minority languages and it is very likely that the 21st century will see the demise of several of these neglected languages. Most countries of the world have the same predicament. National budget allocations for language development focus mainly on the main national languages and a major international language like English.

It would only be fair to state that there are hopeful signs here and there. English-speaking territories like Scotland, Wales and Ireland are energetically reviving Celtic. In New Zealand, the Maori language is being given quite a bit of attention. In Malaysia, parents can choose to send their children to Chinese or Tamil medium primary schools. However, whether or not these and other attempts will result in sustainable development of the minority languages will depend on the capacity of those communities to balance their desire to preserve their unique cultural and linguistic identities with the pressure to take advantage of the obvious benefits of the dominant languages.

It seems to me that there is very little that can be done to prevent many languages from becoming defunct. This is especially true of languages that do not have a written code.

So what can we do to prevent such losses from being total and irrevocable? I suggest that we might put into place a few coping strategies. First of all, we could intensify our efforts at

lobbying governments and communities so that they would do more to nurture languages which otherwise would be in danger of extinction. Secondly, with modern technology at our disposal, we would certainly be able to systematically record for posterity the sound system, syntax, and lexicon of languages which have no hope for survival.

I would like now to draw your attention to the second predicament concerning globalisation and the spread of English as the predominant international language.

Ideally, globalisation should result in an interconnected and interdependent global village with the resources for the transfer and exchange of information and knowledge more or less equally accessible to all. However, in the latest UNDP report, released in mid 1999, it is clear that this ideal is nowhere near to being achieved.

The report stresses that globalisation has, in fact, increased the gap between rich and poor nations, rich and poor individuals. English is clearly a valuable resource in the globalisation process with about 80% of Internet communications currently in English. Yet it is dear that we are far from regarding this as 'a level playing field'. How can citizens in the poor countries obtain the funds, teachers and learning resources to enable them to communicate effectively in English? In fact the UNDP report does make mention of the fact that English, while undoubtedly a valuable resource, is inaccessible to millions of people. It comes as no surprise then that while the English Language continues to consolidate its status as the predominant international language, accusations are leveled from many quarters against the core English-speaking countries that there is a conspiracy by them to substitute colonial and military dominance with economic and linguistic imperialism. In spite of many people viewing the language as universal, the advantage to the English-speaking nations is considerable.

A number of issues on this matter therefore need to be addressed. Can anything be done to create a level playing field, at least as far as accessibility to the English Language is concerned? Is it feasible for foreign aid to pay much greater attention to making language learning resources more readily available in the poorer countries of the world? What is the potential of technological innovations such as instant translations? The future of globalisation and the linguistic implications of this process will depend to a significant extent on how these issues are played out in the world.

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