



THE XXVI ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC CONFERENCE, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE, 27–30 October 2015

Global Language: will the Sun ever set on the Empire of the English Language?

Veronica S. Nesterenko^{a,*}, Elena V. Vychuzhanina^a, Olga I. Milovanova^a

^a*Tomsk State University, 36, Lenin Ave., Tomsk, 634050, Russia*

Abstract

This research paper studies the phenomenon of the Global Language. The English language is commonly considered to be the only challenger for this status though some shift in the language hierarchy can currently be observed. In this article we will focus on the contradictions between traditional viewpoints and up-to-date tendencies and try to predict the future trends of the epoch of language globalization.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of National Research Tomsk State University.

Keywords: Global language; lingua franca; globalization; language hierarchy; language family

1. Introduction

In the last thirty years the term *globalization* has been used to refer to every sphere of human society: economics, politics, education, science, communication and, of course, languages. It is a common point of view that globalization is an integral characteristic of the modern world and it cannot be escaped. At first, experts of all sorts were much inspired by the idea that all peoples can live in harmony coping with common problems together: feed the hungry, protect the vulnerable, support the needy; they predicted a lot of benefit to human civilization through sharing everything with everybody. But, then, more realistic, if not pessimistic, voices could be heard. The era of common good turned out to be a bit farther than it used to seem. On our way to this total happiness we bumped into some obstacles: political, cultural, religious etc.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +7-913-844-67-95.

E-mail address: v.s.nesterenko@gmail.com

Undoubtedly, our future is largely dependent on the ability of nations to communicate and correlate, which seems impossible without a language of international communication. But “choosing one language as global or international implies giving up, rejection, and even death of national languages. And this is a sacrifice that no nation is ready to give” (Ter-Minasova 2014: 9).

However, it is obvious that there is a language which claims to be a means of global communication, i.e. English (cf. Smokotin et al., 2014). Particular factors, both social and historical, entitled it to occupy this position.

This paper aims at reviewing and analyzing the classic authors’ writings on language globalization in order to trail the latest changes occurring in the world language hierarchy.

2. The unique situation

During the last fifty years, thanks to the rapid development of information technologies and modern communication systems, English has spread throughout the world. At present, it is often called *lingua franca*, a language of international communication applied in almost every sphere of social life, a universal language which was defined by David Crystal as global (2003). The uniqueness of the situation also lies in the fact that the number of non-native English speakers significantly outnumbers the one of native speakers – according to Crystal in 2003 the distribution already was 3:1 (2003: 69).

In spite of this statistics, it is obvious now that no non-English-speaking nation is willing to replace their own language with some global one. For example, the Irish and Scottish are reviving their languages and cultures at present. Moreover, people in some European countries as Spain, Italy, and France tend not to speak English, demonstrating their national identity.

Many countries of the world accepted English as an official second or major state language following the United Kingdom and later the United States as their political and cultural leaders. They did gain support of all kinds; they demonstrated their loyalty to their patrons and the readiness to share the offered principles and values. At present many of those countries are becoming mightier and more independent; their place in the world hierarchy is also changing, they want to be distinct: in language, culture, economy and politics. They do not want to be associated with the former metropolis any more. This brings them to the issue of their national languages which cannot but influence the status of English as a world predominating language.

Nevertheless, the status of English as a language of international communication continues to be a widely discussed topic in modern sociolinguistics (cf. Smokotin et al., 2014). The idea of having a universal language to overcome linguistic differences is not new, it goes back to the times of the Babel Tower, extinct Latin and Esperanto; those attempts resulted in failure. What makes us think that this try will be fruitful unlike the previous experience?

Anyway, global English has never been accepted unambiguously.

In 1996 there was an opinion voiced in *the Economist* that English would continue to act as the main language of international communication, and that there was nothing that could damage its worldwide popularity. Whereas in June 1998 the European Association for International Education published the article “Global English: a European perspective” which claimed that

“global English offers a new twist to this utopia, albeit along somewhat different lines. Indeed, global, again, but on whose terms? The question is all the more relevant as a language is intricately bound to a culture” (Kakouridis & Magnan, 1998).

What culture does global English belong to? If it belongs to the global one, which culture should be taken for it? Language and culture are two sides of the same coin: they mutually determine each other, if one is substituted by a foreign one, the other is likely to perish and vice versa.

3. Indicators of “critical mass”

These facts definitely make us think about the role of English in the 21st century. In modern sociolinguistics the problem is widely discussed and presented in the writings of renowned linguists such as David Crystal’s *English as Global Language* (2003), David Graddol’s *The Future of English?* (1997) and *English Next* (2006), Tom McArthur

The English Languages (1998). In Crystal's view, the spread of English has reached the point where it cannot be controlled any more:

“It may well be the case, as was intimated earlier, that the English language has already grown to be independent of any form of social control. There may be a critical number or critical distribution of speakers (analogous to the notion of critical mass in nuclear physics) beyond which it proves impossible for any single group or alliance to stop its growth, or even influence its future. If there were to be a major social change in Britain which affected the use of English there, would this have any real effect on the world trend? It is unlikely” (2003: 190).

First of all, we should pay attention to Crystal's framework for understanding the origin and development of Global English. Here he deals with three issues. Crystal notes that the geographical-historical account gives us the opportunity to look at this process from the historical perspective, the socio-cultural account is employed to explain this information and only a cultural one can give us an idea about the future of the language. Speaking about the main areas of human activity, Crystal shows their dependence on the English language (Crystal, 2003). The use of English in the domains of politics, economics, communication, the press, education etc. and the number of people speaking it represents a kind of critical mass, which can make the spread of English unstoppable.

In the field of international affairs English is the main working language of major political organizations (the UN, the Association of South East Asian Nations, the British Commonwealth, the Council of Europe, the European Union, the NATO), as well as less important ones (the European Academy of Anesthesiology, the European Association of Air Law, the African Hockey Federation, the Demographic Centre of Cairo). The international organizations consisting only of Arabic-speaking or Spanish-speaking countries issue final reports in English, even though it is not their working language.

Another illustrative example is the European Union where a great number of countries are entitled to use their native languages. As it is not easy to find expert interpreters for all language pairs (more than 100), it was decided to resort to English as an intermediary language (Crystal, 2003).

International politics operates in many different ways, for example, political protests. One interesting event of this kind occurred in India during the demonstration supporting Hindi. The most of the banners carried by the marchers were in Hindi but one participant held a sign reading in English ‘Death to English!’

The mass media is an important component of modern public life today. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 57% of newspapers published in the world appear in the countries where English has a special status. English-language newspapers are found in the top five of influential world editions. As far as specialized editions are concerned, the position of the English language is even stronger. Most internationally recognized academic journals are published in English (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2013).

The role of English on the Internet can hardly be overestimated. According to statistics, three-quarters of the world's mail is written in English, about 80 per cent of the world's electronically stored information (both private and public) is in English. Although more than 1000 languages are currently used on the Internet, the influence of English is likely to grow as it plays a key role in the software. As David Crystal ironically notes the major obstacle to the global spread of English would have arisen a generation ago if Bill Gates had been speaking Chinese from birth (Crystal, 2003).

To have a more complete picture it is important to consider the processes which could impede the future spread of English, so to say, prevent critical mass. One of these tendencies is the rejection of colonial language. For example, Tanzania had two official languages, Swahili and English, until 1967, when Swahili got the sole status. The similar situation took place in Malaysia in 1967. Under the National Language Act English was rejected and Malay became the sole official language. These cases are not numerous and the population of these countries is not large enough to change the status of English as a whole.

A language achieves global status because of the political and economic power of a country where the people speak this language. In this respect an interesting idea was expressed by Bismarck. When in 1898 he was asked about the decisive factor in modern history, the Iron Chancellor said, “The fact that the North Americans speak English”. At present in the United States there has been debate on the status of the English language and it is suggested to make English official. The requirement to adopt regulations indicates that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark”. The essence of the conflict is whether to give preference to mutual intelligibility or national

identity. And although the situation should be seriously analyzed, the dominant position of English does not give rise to doubt now (95 per cent of the population speak English) (Crystal, 2003).

4. Language hierarchy of a transitional period

The main thesis of David Graddol can be formulated as follows: the world is going through a transition that will create a new language hierarchy. The fate of English as the global language is not so clear. Graddol notes that “the spread of English in recent years is, by any criterion, a remarkable phenomenon. But the closer one examines the historical causes and current trends, the more it becomes apparent that the future of English will be more complex, more demanding of understanding and more challenging for the position of native-speaking countries than has hitherto been supposed”(Graddol 1997: 3). And although we deal here with the reciprocal causation, i.e. that globalization encourages the spread of the English language, and the spread of English facilitates further globalization, it seems rather difficult to speak about the future of the language at present as its vitality is based on contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, to be a means of international communication and mutual understanding English has to keep the language norms, however, the intense spread of English as a foreign language results in its splitting and coming into existence its numerous variants. Due to the first factor, a large number of people studying English are constantly growing, whereas, due to the latter, the language is partly decreasing in its significance.

Demographic changes tend to have a dramatic influence on any language. The population of the developing countries is growing younger, while the population of the developed ones is getting older. This leads to such economic problems as a lack of qualified workers. The immigrants arriving from the Third World countries occupy the vacancies, bringing language transformation along with them. For example, in 1980 London schools registered 200 languages, whereas in 2000 this figure amounted to 300 (Graddol, 1997; 2006).

Stable economic development of the country urges the interest to the study of its language. Under the conditions of the transitional period, we can see the proportion shift of the world’s major economic systems. India, China and the countries of the South America are becoming mightier and more independent; that is a subject of concern for western analysts.

If we take into account the demographic and economic changes, it would not be difficult to suppose which languages could compete with Global English for its title. Such languages as Chinese, Spanish and Arabic have already begun to act as *linguae francae* in some regions. The governments of these countries are eager to support the interest in their national languages and cultures by all means. In 2004 the Chinese government launched the project “The Confucius Institute” all over the world; in 2006 over 30 million people were there taught the Chinese language (Graddol, 2006). In 2005 all schools of Brazil introduced the Spanish language as an alternative to English, and Trinidad and Tobago have declared their intention to become a Spanish-speaking country by 2020. As for Arabic, the number of people speaking it is constantly increasing, and nowadays it is developing faster than ever due to demographic factors.

According to Graddol, the process of the expansion of the English language should be viewed in a wider context of the transformation of the total language system. Major world languages are acquiring more and more importance and we are likely to have the situation soon when each of them will occupy its own sphere of influence. In this case, we will not be able to speak about one global language.

5. A new language family

While Graddol speaks about the possibility of the transformation of the whole hierarchy of the world languages, another famous linguist Tom McArthur emphasizes the spread of the English varieties (“the English languages”). He argues that the existence of a large number of dialects and varieties is certain to result in splitting into completely different languages. As there are no precise criteria, it is impossible to determine a distinct language. While analyzing the bulk of all varieties of modern English, McArthur reached the conclusion that all of them can be considered true or, at least, potential members of a new language family. He goes on that the members of this English language family are different but, yet, connected with each other and characterized by similarities and correlations which are typical of them, in the same way, we reveal that the members of, for example, Romanic or Turkic language families have also much in common (McArthur, 1998).

Nowadays English is spoken in 113 territories. Some of its varieties, for example, the Scottish variant of English and Tok Pisin, an official language of Papua New Guinea, are considered to be distinct languages. Although Spanglish (the Spanish language with heavy usage of English borrowings) in the USA and Kamtok in Cameroon have not received official recognition, they are quite different variants. All in all, the total number of English-related varieties equals to 80.

Referring to the case of the Latin language, McArthur demonstrates how differently this phenomenon can be dealt with. Those who share the pessimistic viewpoint fear that English is doomed like Latin. The fact that so many distinct languages come into existence frightens them, the only English for them is the Standard English, i.e. codified. Their opponents, on the contrary, are full of optimism and ready to accept any scenario of the further language development enthusiastically. They do not tend to consider the death of Latin as a tragedy, as it continued to serve as a language of science up to the 17th century. They look at the codified English as a comfortable means of communication, but not something to worship. Their position is: let us deal with the actual situation as it is and think what has caused it. Such contemplations can help to understand what influences the development of major languages at the moment, and whether it is reasonable to consider this process from the historical perspective.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, in this paper we have taken an attempt to foresee the fortune of the English language, which possesses, at present, the status of the global lingua franca. We have come to the conclusion that it is most likely to keep its leading role in the nearest future. But long-term predictions seem to be vague. Two scenarios can be marked: according to the first, English will become a part of multilingual experience of future generations, whereas the other supposes that the whole world will become English-speaking. The crucial factor, that could have an influence on the further destiny of global English, taking into consideration geopolitical factors, is the United States as a dominant element of contemporary world. However, we should point out that further growing of the number of the people who use English as the second or foreign language may destroy the present language hierarchy. Judging by this, we can agree on the possibility of the emergence of a new language hierarchy, where English will take a more humble place. The choice of the language is determined by a set of factors such as demographic shifts, urbanization, new forms of communication, international market specialization and others. Currently all of them are experiencing great changes that cannot but influence the status of global English. It cannot be controlled socially any more. A united and monolith model of the English language, which it used to be, is becoming now more and more pluralistic. New English varieties, which appeared during the past 50 years, may form a distinct language family in future.

The English language and the situation itself, in which it happens to be involved in the 21st century, are unique, indeed. None of the languages before has gained the same spread and popularity within such a short period of time. The socio-cultural circumstances under which this transformation is going on are unique as well. The point is that at the moment we are witnessing an overwhelming process in the Western countries leading to eliminating identity as it is: religious, national, gender etc. This mainstream tendency is based on the idea of freedom. The idea itself is of great importance for the civilized mankind but, when it becomes prevailing and dominating all other values, it turns out to be damaging and even dangerous, since major social institutions, e.g. family, are decreasing in importance dramatically. In this respect we should emphasize that Eastern countries are willing to defend and keep their identity by all means. This eagerness makes a favorable effect on the demographic situation in these countries, which, in its turn, plays a significant role for the status of their languages.

References

- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2013). *Britannica Book of the Year*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica.
- Graddol, D. (1997). *The Future of English? A guide to forecasting the popularity of the English language in the 21st century*. London: British Council.
- Graddol, D. (2006). *English Next: Why global English may mean the end of 'English as a Foreign Language'*. Plymouth: British Council.
- Kakouridis, T., & Magnan, M. (1998). Global English: A European Perspective. From: <http://www.kakouridis.net/2007/03/global-english-a-european-perspective/>

- McArthur, T. (1998). *The English languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smokotin, V.; Alekseyenko, A., & Petrova, G. (2014). The Phenomenon of linguistic globalization: English as the Global Lingua Franca (EGLF). *Procedia-Social Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 154, 509-513.
- Ter-Minasova, S. (2014). The dialectics of international communication. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 154, 8-13.