

Globalization and the English Language

Asist. univ. drd. Rodica-Cristina Apostolatu
Universitatea "Dunărea de Jos" din Galați

Abstract: *Lucrarea de față ia în discuție relația dintre globalizare și limba engleză. Asocierea acestor termeni poate fi interpretată în multe feluri. Pe de o parte, se poate referi la pătrunderea accelerată, pe diverse căi, a limbii engleze în viața și activitatea oamenilor din întreaga lume – ceea ce ar putea constitui o amenințare la adresa diversității lingvistice și culturale, iar, pe de altă parte, se poate referi la fenomenul obiectiv al răspândirii rapide a limbii engleze fie ca a doua limbă de comunicare (alături de cea nativă), fie doar ca limbă străină.*

Introduction

English is sometimes compared to a 'Trojan horse' and is called the language of imperialism. The status of English is considered a form of linguistic imperialism that promotes and maintains global inequalities and control by those in power. In fact, scholars concur that language and the exercising of power are intimately linked.

Undisputedly, the English language has become the predominant global language of communication. Its supremacy may be attributed to several direct and tangible causes and many other less transparent ones and has multiple effects on all levels. The reasons propelling this spread and its impact will be discussed below.

The Causes of Spread of the English Language

The reasons behind the power of the English language in the contemporary world are not only numerous but also controversial with scholars predominantly falling in one of two opposing perspectives: *The Ecology of Language Paradigm* and *The Diffusion of Language Paradigm*. The major forces behind the power of the English language are globalization, transnational corporations, gatekeeping privileges, linguistic imperialism, economic power, media and technology and so on.

Most scholars acknowledge the direct link between globalization and the spread of the English language. However, globalization itself is a rather vague term used to describe changes occurring over the last two decades, if not much longer. Some regard globalization as a long historical progression traceable far back in history (e.g. Robertson 1992), whereas others refer to it as the continuation of modernity (e.g. Giddens 1999) or linked to postmodernity (e.g. Harvey 1990). In fact, Mignolo (2000: 236) argues that, on a larger scale, globalization at the end of the twentieth century (mainly occurring through transnational corporations, the media and technology) is the most recent configuration of a process that can be traced back to the 1500s, with the beginning of cross-Atlantic explorations and the consolidation of Western hegemony.

For Pennycook, globalization needs to be viewed as a combination of a historical process in continuation and, in the latest of the historical stages of globalization, a radically new process. Giddens (1999: 10) believes that globalization is a new revolutionary process that includes economic, political, technological and cultural processes.

Globalization has its proponents as well as its opponents with the former viewing it as the interlocking of various cultures and countries, the creation of financial and economic webs and advancement primarily enabled by improved means of communication and technological advancement. This interdependence is believed by some to enhance interest in peace, presumably because of common interests, improve living standards and generate opportunities through what Friedman (1999: 45) calls the 'democratization of technology' and the 'democratization of finance'.

The price-tag for such valuable connectivity and rapid change is, however, as Graddol (1997) asserts, uncertainty and the loss of traditional jobs as well as much of the familiar, resulting in some alienation and opposition. There is an ugly side to globalization as well: the exploitation of cheap labour, the concentration of extreme wealth in a small number of

hands and the growing gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not.

There is the view that globalization is the process of the Americanization / Westernization of the world to promote and safeguard American / Western interests, the McDonalozation of society or creation of what Barber (1996) calls the McWorld, a world appeased by an abundance of commodities and a certain degree of affluence neither of which are equitably distributed.

1. Globalization

The English language has spread throughout the world to become one of the most traded languages. A press release about the British Council's 2000 project reported that 1,400 million of the world's population lives in countries where English has an official status, one-fifth of the world's population is relatively competent in English and the other four-fifths indubitably feels the pressures of English which has become the main language of books, newspapers, airport and traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science technology, diplomacy, sport, international competitions, pop music and advertising.

The fact that globalization and language spread go hand in hand and that language is not regarded as a neutral player in the globalization formula are obvious.

Kachru (1986) considers English as a useful language that is neutral and beneficial. It is neutral in the sense that it does not carry the political connotations of native languages (even though it originally carried the meanings of the colonizers). Crystal (2003: 120) voices a similar view, claiming that English "...is a language which has repeatedly found itself in the right place at the right time". For Crystal, it was the language of colonial powers, of the leaders of the industrial revolution and of the world economic and later technological powers. Technology opened the way for English to permeate and then rule the media. With this came a need for more international communication and relations and English was there both in the United Nations and on the internet. Very simply, it was a snowball effect rather than a calculated effort.

English is remarkable for its diversity, its propensity to change and be changed. Some analysts see this hybridity and permeability of English as defining features, allowing it to expand quickly into new domains and explaining in part its success as a world language.

Attributing the diversity and flexibility of the English language to an *inbuilt* superiority of the language, however, could be dangerous since other factors could more aptly explain these traits such as social and historical factors and one cannot claim one language is better than another: a language is as good as its ability to express all ranges of its speakers' needs. In fact, many scholars question this explanation of the ascendancy of the English language. Kibbee (2003) adds that hybridity and permeability are not terms that can be defined scientifically.

2. Transnational Corporations and International Organizations

International Organizations and Transnational Corporations are major vehicles behind the spread of English as a global language of communication as their inception increased the need to communicate with speakers of other languages. Transnational Corporations are responsible for two-thirds of the world's trade and constitute half of the world's great economies. Located in the world's Big Three (North America, the EU and Japan), they tend to promote English language usage. Globalization is attributed to technological developments in electronic communication and computers which have enabled transnational corporations to conduct international transactions and political decisions, freeing businesses from the nation state's control and creating unrestricted markets. Organizations such as the European Union and the North American Free Trade Area, the World Bank and the International Monetary

Fund have also been instrumental. Globalization has then enhanced the tendency for economic, social, political and cultural processes to take place on a global scale rather than within the confines of particular countries or regions. Thus, the largest economies are Transnational Corporations and not countries. Corporations exert their influence on education by financing educational materials throughout the world, which includes presentation of information to their advantage.

3. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and English as an International Language (EIL)

Globalization has amplified the need to communicate with speakers of other languages and English has increasingly been the chosen language of communication among people of different backgrounds and mother tongues, as a lingua franca or international language. Graddol (2006: 62), however, notes that there is a linguistic hierarchy and that “English is no longer the ‘only show in town’” at the top of that hierarchy; Mandarin is gaining ground as are Spanish, Hindi and Arabic. Nonetheless, English is frequently used and not only because it is a lingua franca but also because it is culturally regarded as the appropriate language for a particular communicative context. In Lebanon, for example, medical conferences are normally conducted in English, certain cultural / social functions in French and a family discussion around politics in Arabic. The prevalence of ELF is associated with its adaptability and lack of consistency in form that goes beyond the participant level, i.e., each combination of interactants seems to negotiate and govern their own variation of lingua franca use in terms of proficiency level, use of code-mixing, degree of pidginization, etc. (Gramkow Andersen 1993 as cited in House 2003: 557).

Accuracy of language use is not measured by the standards of native speakers nor do speakers seek to achieve native speaker proficiency or integration into the native speaker community. ELF has also gained popularity because it offers speakers the venue to negotiate meaning with the tools of a common base language into which native language practices can be drawn. In fact, Firth (1996) speaks of a *let it pass* in communication between speakers of other languages where the communicators overlook incomprehension in the hope that it will later become clear or prove to be unnecessary. Thus, the conventional scales used to measure language proficiency, such as native speaker communicative competence, become meaningless in ELF where language is primarily a means of performing certain roles and needs, a shared instrument for communication with speakers of other tongues. The base of this common ground is not preset, but continuously negotiated. A main issue in relation to ELF is the identity of the speaker, which presumably is not defined by ELF but by the speaker’s native tongue (House 2003: 559).

Because ELF is not a national language, but a mere tool bereft of collective cultural capital, it is a language usable neither for identity markers, nor for a positive (integrative) disposition towards an L2 group, nor for a desire to become similar to members of this L2 group - simply because there is no definable group of ELF speakers. ELF users, then, use ELF as a transactional language for their own communicative purposes and advantages (House 2003: 560).

Thus ELF serves instrumental purposes, a means of communication which is a means of communication distinguished from English for identification.

Conclusion

Whether it is a result of imperialistic plans of western powers or it is a natural consequence of globalization, it is certain that English is increasingly becoming popular in media and education all over the world. To analyze better whether or not the increasing use of English is detrimental to other languages and cultures in the long run, a further and detailed research needs to be conducted on the extent of the use of English in different

societies and its effects on their educational systems and cultures. Also, having noted that the spread of English is an indication of the globalization process, the analysis of who supports and who opposes to the spread of English in culture in general and in education in specific, one can draw some conclusions who supports and who rejects globalization.

References:

- Barber, B. (1996). *Jihad vs Mcworld: How globalization and tribalism are reshaping the world*. New York: Ballantine.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Firth, A. (1996, April). *Lingua Franca English and conversation analysis*. "Journal of Pragmatics" 26 (2), pp. 237 – 252.
- Friedman, T.L. (1999). *The lexis and the olive tree: Understanding globalization*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and identity in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1999). *Runaway world: How globalization is reshaping our lives*. London: Profile.
- Graddol, D. (1997). *The future of English: A guide to forecasting the popularity of English in the 21st century*. London: The British Council.
- Graddol, D. (2006). *English next: Why global English may mean the end of 'English as a foreign language'*. London: The British Council.
- Harvey, D. (1990). *The conditions of postmodernity*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- House, J. (2003). *English as a lingua franca: a threat to multilingualism*. "Journal of Sociolinguistics" 7(4), pp. 556 – 578.
- Kachru, B.B. (1986). *The Alchemy of English: the spread, functions, and models of non native Englishes*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Kibbee, D. (2003). *Language policy and linguistic theory*. in J. Mauris & M. Morris (Eds.). (2003). *Languages in a globalizing world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mignolo, W. (2000). *Local histories / global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Pennycook, A. (1994). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. London & New York: Longman.
- Robertson, R. (1992). *Globalization: Social theory and global culture*. London: Sage.