

Globalization of English: Loss of Minority Languages and Cultural Destruction

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[Abstract] This paper discusses the globalized state of English and how the language merges with, engulfs, gorges, and finally replaces languages of minority communities, thereby obliterating cultural identity and memory. It explores the reasons for the rapid and pervasive spread of English. It explores and discusses language and cultural knowledge among minority communities, indigenous peoples, and immigrants. Examples, current and historical, are offered. The paper details the major crisis in language loss occurring in developing countries and cautions that that diverse languages and cultures risk being swallowed by global English.

[Keywords] globalization, globalization of English, language of disadvantaged nations

Introduction

After World War II, the world entered a post-industrial period characterized by a persistent Cold War and confrontation between East and West. Regional wars never ceased. Scientific and technological advances have made the globe smaller and international cooperation broader; thus, internationalization, globalization, and ecological interdependency characterize the 21st century. With the continuous increase and expansion of human communication, English has been playing an increasingly important role. The globalized English which is emerging confers advantages as well as disadvantages, for it provides a common communicative code. However, the languages of smaller, less powerful nations are receding in importance and are gradually being superseded by dominant world languages such as English. By analyzing this trend and noting its causes, we may understand how global English overwhelms the languages of developing nations and how this process leads to cultural annihilation, just as plants from other parts of the world may choke out native species. This paper examines the threatened loss of culture that attends language eradication and suggests possible actions for safeguarding linguistic and cultural diversity. The varied cultures of our world have developed over a long history, and we as human beings should treasure their continued existence.

Status Quo and Causes of the Globalization of English

At present, English is not only the official, semi-official, or general language of more than 70 countries, but is widely used in 100—130-odd other countries and regions worldwide. No other language has spread so quickly and widely in human history. Even in its prime, Latin influenced only a circumscribed area of the ancient world. By contrast, English dominates the planet. In 1936, no more than 194 million people could speak English; the figure rose to 700 million by 1986. The population that could speak English fluently rose to 1.8—2 billion in 1997, with 350 million in Asia alone. According to Kubota and Ward (2000), today's global use of English can be represented in three layers: an inner layer where English is spoken natively; an outer layer where

English is the language of education; and an extended layer where English is a dominant foreign language. The inner layer includes Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Britain, and the United States, where English is the mother tongue in which official business is conducted. The outer layer is chiefly comprised of former British colonies such as Ghana, India, Bengal, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Though English is not the mother tongue in these countries, it is widely used in communication and electronic media, so there are many fluent English speakers, and the language plays an important part in daily social life. The extended layer includes such countries as Mainland China, Egypt, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Nepal, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and the countries of the Caribbean and South America. Here, English is not the official language, but it is widely taught, spread, and used as a foreign or second language.

Presently in China, the PRC Ministry of Education requires English in China's three-level system of education; it is now one of the three major subjects in the annual College Entrance Examination. The frenzy for English learning among youth has become increasingly heated. According to the British Embassy in Beijing, as many as 100,000 examinees sat for the 36 IELTS tests in 2005 alone (IELTS New Trend in May, 2006). Multiple factors account for this popularity of English: history, tradition, political expediency, science and technology, commerce and trade, economy, and culture.

Let us first consider history, tradition, and politics. Industrial capitalism originated in Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries and developed quickly. With Britain in the lead, capitalist countries expanded continuously in quest of resources and markets. The result was a large number of British colonies and, later, the British Commonwealth and its satellites. With the deepening of British colonialism and its penetration of culture, English became the official or semi-official language of the dominated countries. Britain was an Allied power in World War II, along with the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. These powers soundly defeated the Fascist Axis Countries led by Germany, Italy, and Japan. After the war, the military strength of United States expanded, and Britain's cultural influence continued.

The United States and Britain-centered North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the former Warsaw Convention Organization led by Soviet Union confronted each other for a long time in Europe. A number of smaller countries sought or were incorporated into the armed protection of the United States and Britain. Political and cultural identification are the important reasons for the widespread and use of English in these countries.

As a result of Anglo-American dominance in technology, English has become the primary technological language of satellite microelectronics, global satellite communication, computer network linkage, and information technology. Neither advanced education in science or technology, nor the introduction of sophisticated machinery and equipment can occur without the use of the English language. Thus, scientific and technological factors have been important in the widespread dissemination of English. Likewise, English is the language of international commercial communication where it is used for most contracts. The presence of an international communicative code fosters trade, which in turn brings about social progress, economic development, and in many places, a continual rise in living standards. English proficiency may not only offer people a means of contact with the technologically developed world, but may provide abundant economic opportunity. The marketplace utility of English makes it extremely attractive to learners around the globe.

The economic influence of Anglophone nations also penetrates culture, promoting the widespread use of English. Via their robust economies and advanced technologies, the United States and Great Britain have enormous impact on world economic trends. Immense exportation of products, financial capital, and a parallel linguistic and cultural influence mark the economic, political, and cultural climate of today's economic powers. "Soft power," Nye's term for a country's ability to influence others with its ideology and culture, characterizes the way the United States' approaches other cultures. MacDonald and KFC, universally popular, symbolize American culture around the world. Everywhere, people are bombarded by Hollywood films, American fashions, and popular music. Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck radiate an appeal to people in all quarters, especially teenagers. Exchanges in sports and the arts, official and nongovernmental, abound. Meanwhile, ever-increasing transnational tourism augments the importance of English. The globalization of English has deep roots in world history, which has extended into our times. Its continuing spread is prodigious.

Decline and Devastation of Disadvantaged Nations and Lag and Fade of their Languages and Cultures

A language dies when people no longer use it in communication. Even if there are a small number of speakers remaining, a language may be virtually dead because there is no occasion for the survivor(s) to use such linguistic codes; then there becomes less incentive to it to teach children. For example, in the United States, Yupik in Alaska and Mohawk and Onondaga in New York State are only used by a small number of adults (yourdictionary.com); these languages are considered nearly extinct. Many of Australia's aboriginal language are considered extant because of occasional surviving speakers; this is optimistic. When speakers are isolated, they have no opportunity to use these languages in communication, and the languages are alive only in a technical sense. When human languages die, several factors may be responsible.

There may be damage to speakers' environments from an obliterating natural disaster. In 1815, the eruption of Indonesia's Sumbawa volcano resulted in the death of all Tamboran speakers and, thus, the language. Language decline may be fostered by poverty, hunger, malnutrition, and disease. Before 1949, the ethnic minorities of China who lived in Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and Ningxia were devastated by smallpox and other diseases. According to the PRC's State Council Information Office, for 1959 the average life span of Tibetans was only 36 years, and the infant mortality was as high as 43%. The illiteracy rate was 95% during the democratic reform. Before 1949, the average life span of people in Ningxia was only about 30 years, and the illiteracy rate was above 95%.

In many African countries, people are still fighting poverty and underdevelopment, while large numbers of children struggle with disease and hunger. Many ethnic groups do not have a written language, and in such instances, there may be no available schooling, or the schooling offered may be in the language of some other group (Gann et. Al., 2005). States may prohibit the use of an ethnic minority. For instance, in Greece, it was once illegal to speak Macedonian or sing Macedonian songs. In Turkey, Kurdish was at one time prohibited (Daniel & Sizamme, 2000, p. 146). Similar things have also happened in the history of the United States. It was also illegal to speak the Spanish language in the public schools in Texas until 1971 (ditto, p. 22), and there is an effort to prevent the encroachment of Spanish in approximately half the states in the US (Gann et al). Languages may become extinct when a war or massacre causes decreases in population or

when speakers of other languages invade. There are cases in which a subjugated group and people must give up its language in order to survive, or when physical and linguistic genocide occur together. After the farmers' uprising in 1932, about 25,000 people were surrounded because of their Indian-like apparel. Many people ceased using their native language to escape being killed; the result was the simultaneous extinction of Indian language and Indian people in Salvador. The genocide and exile imposed on Yahi Indians by white colonists in California led to the destruction of this ethnic group along with its language. When in 19th century Australia, the aboriginals in Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Melbourne, and Tasmania were exterminated by European colonists, their languages vanished, as well. This process included the extermination of Yemen speakers in the Taroom region of Queensland in 1857 and the massacre of Biyaygiri speakers in the Cardwell region of Queensland in 1870's, the latter having been characterized as diabolical and dangerous.

Most of these full-blooded Australian aboriginals were killed or died of illness; the young women were captured and taken as slaves or concubines and the hybrid offspring grew up in the English-speaking environment so that their languages disappeared. In today's world, there are more than 2,000 languages each used by less than 1,000 people, and half of them are no longer used by children (O'Neil, n. d.). Minority languages are, thus, in decline and approaching extinction. Economic and technological underdevelopment render groups vulnerable to invasion, engulfment, and supersession by more powerful languages and cultures.

English Hegemony and Minority Language: Penetration, Engulfing, and Supersession

Between the 17th and 18th centuries, long-distance trade policies of the major powers laid the foundation for the spread of English. New economic policies, which included reinforcement of profiteering, short-term cost reduction, international trade and ethnic labor market decontrol, caused the spread of English to mount. The Iraqi War was mainly launched by English-speaking countries and may be connected to the worldwide patterns of export and major occurrences in international affairs.

The penetrated fields are broad, as the spread of English is all-pervasive, and it is difficult to find a country that does not have English taught as the mother tongue or second or third language. Native English speakers no longer hold that English is an "exclusive language." Nowadays, it is a commercial necessity to teach English to non-native speakers. Assistance to developing nations sometimes takes the form of English instruction. The export of language and culture makes the linguistic status of English higher. Acquisition of English is not only fashionable, but an efficient means of becoming rich. The annual gross value of China's English instruction market is about 1.5B RMB.

There are more than 50,000 English training institutions nationwide (City of Education). In Britain, the "Industry of English," including overseas learning, amounts to over £10B revenue every year. Tens of thousands of English language training schools alone yield £1.3B for Britain every year (Shi Yan, 2005). English is spreading at such a rapid speed that such international languages as Spanish, France, Russian, Chinese, and Arabic are far outstripped. English is now penetrating the linguistic territory of ethnic minorities, aboriginal tribes, and migrant communities. The engulfment and supersession of minority languages deepens daily; there is even a threat to the languages of comparatively larger nationalities. Some scholars are worried that by the end of this century, 75-90% of minority languages, particularly aboriginal languages, will be superseded by English and die out. The faster English spreads, the more rapid this extinction is likely to be.

Glanville Price once called English the “killer language.” People deem that Irish language was “murdered” by English. As previously noted, Suppression of minority languages by dominant powers has long been a form of political control. Between 1870 and 1928, it was the policy of the United States government to eradicate the home language of Native American children consigned to government boarding schools (Keohane, 2005). In the latter half of the 19th century, Germany and Russia both sought to dominate Poland, and both attempted to eradicate the Polish language (*New York Times*. 1888; *Revolution and Rebirth*). In the present century, English is being spread not by political coercion but by “soft power”; however, the effect on minority language and culture is similar.

According to Ethnologue (Summer Institute of Language), 90% of the world’s population use approximately only 100 of the world’s at least 5,000 — 6,700 languages. Estimates of the actual number of human languages vary. The Guide to Communication Means of Language and Language Learning places the number of the existing known languages in the world is 5,651 (former Germanic Democratic Republic); Ladefloged (2001) places the figure at 7,000. Krauss’s research suggests that of these approximately 6,000 languages, about 600 are comparatively “safe”; while the majority 90% are in danger of extinction. Krauss shows that in the United States and Canada, 149 out of 187 aboriginal languages are no longer learned by children, constituting 80% of the cases. In South America, 110 among 400 of the extant languages show little vitality, equivalent to 27%; the figures for Central America are 50 out of 300 or 17% of the languages of Central America.

Ethnologue estimates that conservatively 20% of the world’s languages are nearing extinction. In Africa, 54 languages are now extinct, while 116 languages are close to this point. It is estimated that 90% of Australia’s 250 aboriginal languages have already become extinct or are nearly so (Nettle & Romaine, 2000, p. 8-9). It is estimated that the ethnic languages of the immigrants to Australia will be completely superseded by English in not more than three generations. “A national language supersedes the language of an ethnic minority; while English supersedes them both.” Internationalization, world-wide communication, and globalization have intensified this trend. The following table of language transfer documents the speed of transfer and replacement of community and national languages in contact with by English.

The following comparison table recorded the First-Generation and Second-Generation Migrants’ Linguistic Change in the 1996 Australian Census (Material source: Clyne & Kipp, 1997).

Birth Place	First-Generation Language Change %	Second-Generation Language Change %				
		Endogamous Marriage	Born in Australia		International Marriage	Second Generation (Total)
			Only Father	Only Mother		
Austria	48.3	80.0	89.4	92.2	91.1	89.7
Brazil	9.8	12.7	55.8	68.9	62.3	38.0
France	37.2	46.5	77.0	83.3	80.4	77.7
Germany	48.2	77.6	90.0	93.6	92.0	89.7

Greece	6.4	16.1	44.6	55.1	51.9	28.0
Hong Kong	9.0	8.7	43.9	53.9	48.7	35.7
Hungary	31.8	64.2	85.9	90.7	89.2	82.1
Italy	14.7	42.6	73.1	80.9	79.1	57.9
Japan	15.4	5.4	65.0	79.2	68.9	57.6
South Korea	11.6	5.4	59.0	65.7	61.5	18.0
Lebanon	5.5	11.4	34.2	49.0	43.6	20.1
Macedonia	3.0	7.4	33.2	41.3	38.6	14.8
Malta	36.5	70.0	92.0	94.0	92.9	82.1
Holland	61.9	91.1	95.5	97.2	96.5	95.0
Other South American Countries	17.2	15.7	61.3	74.2	67.1	50.5
Poland	19.6	58.4	81.0	89.8	86.9	75.7
China Mainland	4.6	17.1	46.1	58.1	52.8	37.4
Spain	22.4	38.3	69.6	78.3	75.0	63.0
Taiwan	3.4	5.0	28.7	30.7	29.2	21.0
Turkey	5.8	5.0	34.7	52.3	46.6	16.1

The above table displays demographic and language characteristics of immigrants from the 20 most numerous immigrant groups in Australia. For first-generation immigrants from eight countries, the rate of transfer to the mainstream language is below 10%; only in one case is this rate higher than 50%; and the average does not exceed 21.32% of the total. In the second-generation, no country is below 10%; as many as five countries are over 50%, and the average exceeds 52.50%. It is therefore reasonable to predict that, by the third generation, immigrant families will have assimilated into the linguistic mainstream. One may argue that immigrants to a predominantly English-speaking country are in a different situation from people who are engulfed by English on their own soil, but the effect on language diversity worldwide may in the end be fairly similar, for both situations result in reduction of language diversity.

Loss of Disadvantaged Ethnic Languages and Drain of their Cultural Knowledge

It is within the myriad cultures and diverse languages of the world that the rich treasures of human knowledge are stored. When a language dies, something of its unique perspective on human experiences vanishes with it. Due to the near disappearance of China's Manchu language and a

lack of scholars proficient in this language, 5 million-odd archived documents are totally inaccessible. These represent the contributions of the Qing Dynasty, 260-odd years of material on politics, economics, military science, culture, diplomacy, religion, astronomy, geography, and folk customs. These documents are scattered throughout the world. Heilongjiang Provincial Archives alone keeps 43,800 documents.

The languages of Australia's immigrants are now less used in universities, secondary schools, and primary schools. Once these languages become extinct, Australia, which foresees its future in terms of global interdependence, will lose the vital opportunity to utilize these languages as a resource. In the United States, there is a widespread tendency to regard the use of languages other than English as problem rather than resource (see, for example, State Department of Education, Tennessee).

President Bush stated it is inappropriate to sing *The Star Spangled Banner* in Spanish (MSNBC), and half the states have enacted "English Only" legislation, limiting the use of other languages in schools and public discourse (Language Legislation in the USA). Children from newcomer families have an unquestionable right to learn the majority language so they can participate fully in the host culture; but it is regrettable if such education obliterates linguistic heritage.

The rich knowledge deposited in human languages and cultures over thousands of years are of vital importance to our existence as human beings. There is, for example, a growing interest in the traditional medical and pharmacological knowledge developed by various cultures over millennia. Fully one quarter of the medicines developed in the United States were first synthesized from plants. Aspirin is from spiraea, morphine from the poppy, and quinine from Peruvian bark. Herbal knowledge from diverse regions is important in modern medicine and pharmacology. This knowledge was historically encoded in languages other than English, and it would be foolhardy to assume that it has all been accessed by one international language. Traditional Chinese medicine, Chinese materia medica, Tibetan medicine, and Mongolian pharmacy, have made great contributions to pharmacology worldwide and now play an important role in treating human diseases.

At present, 20-100 tons of traditional Chinese drugs exported from Aidian in Guangxi, China to Viet Nam annually, account for approximately 200 million RMB (Overseas Version of People's Daily, June 26, 2002). If we cannot access accumulated medical wisdom and knowledge because it is encoded in languages no longer in use, we condemn people to much needless suffering. The contributions of multi-cultural and linguistic diversity encompass a broad range of cultural wisdom. In language, we encode common sense, scientific concepts, and methods for solving diverse problems, such as land management, plant cultivation, and animal breeding.

Multi-cultural and linguistic diversity provide human beings with opportunities to learn from each other, and such sharing promotes harmony. The semantic choices and conceptual frameworks of world languages are important in sharing existing knowledge. The viewpoints and practices of different language users are important in the creation of new knowledge. This is rather like understanding the diversity of food on our planet. Once, there were probably more than 50,000 edible species of plants and animals, but some were destroyed by excessive exploitation.

It is reported that in World War II, an American fighter plane crashed in Northern Australia as it returned from New Guinea. There was food all around, but three of the airmen starved because they did not know what was edible, and there were no aborigines to help. Language, culture, and knowledge about different regions and nations are not only connected with local people's lives,

but also closely related to the intrusion of outside groups and the future existence of the human species.

Conclusion

Language is not only a tool for thinking, communication, and information transmission, but a carrier of cultural knowledge. The extinction of any nation's language means the loss of that group's accumulated cultural knowledge. Human society has developed into our global post-industrial era, but most world languages, especially those of developing countries in the Third World, face annihilation. It is not always possible to salvage a threatened language. In the 1970s, non-Indian Salvadorians deeply regretted the loss of cultural heritage among the Indigenous, but to no effect. Fortunately, linguists and cultural anthropologists are alerting the international community to the importance of protecting human language and culture. The language and culture of any ethnic group contains the knowledge of generations. This is a collective treasure belonging to the entire human race, and everyone on our globe should respect and protect it. This is not only the responsibility of the affected ethnic group, but the duty of all.

Western European nations with advanced industry, culture, and technology should not exploit their linguistic advantage. Foreign language acquisition should not be a one-way street where all the peoples of the earth learn English, and native speakers of English remain monolingual. World language speakers should understand the importance of linguistic diversity and show respect for minority languages and cultures.

It is important that a developing country retain the historic language that encodes its unique experience, even if Global English is used for specific purposes. It is to no one's advantage if a developing country is engulfed by Global English and loses its linguistic heritage. If we value each other's uniqueness, we can work hand in hand to build a homestead for humankind where diverse languages and cultures exist in harmony.

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