

The Rise of English as a Common Global Language: Practical  
and Ethical Implications

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The rise of the English language as the world's new "lingua franca" seems to be an interesting practical and ethical issue. I have always felt lucky, and perhaps even a bit guilty, about the fact that I was born into being a native English-speaker. The ability to speak the world's lingua franca creates opportunities for jobs, business, travel and entertainment that aren't available for those born into circumstances where it is difficult to get access to English. Part of me wishes everyone had the chance to learn English and take advantage of these opportunities but, at the same time, I also feel that lingual and cultural diversity is an important idea to uphold. It also seems that those in undeveloped parts of the world, where English is not easily learned, are at a major disadvantage and this may further the gap between the first and third world. In this case, we need to consider the negative and positive repercussions of having a common language. Having a shared language provides numerous benefits to the world, but it may also negatively affect other languages, Anglo-Americanize other cultures, and create barriers for the undeveloped world.

Although some argue that English-speaking countries unfairly promote the language, the language most likely has a life of its own by this point. The only thing to do now is support the positive aspects and limit the negative aspects of English as the world's language. This can be done by making the language 'neutral,' respecting other languages and cultures in the teaching of English, and preventing it from being 'owned' by any country or people.

Even though it is not the most widely spoken language in the world, there is no doubt that English is an integral part of globalization. In his article, "Lingual Non-Imperialism," Ian Seaton notes (1997) that English is "fast becoming the only language for global communication" in six 'worlds.' These worlds include "transnational companies, internet communication, scientific research, youth culture, international goods and services, and news and entertainment media" (p. 381). And since English is such an important aspect of globalization, anyone who speaks it will have an advantage in the modern world, propelling the language towards worldwide use.

But the spread of English throughout the world may diminish the importance or strength of other languages. The need to communicate in a common language like English, in addition to other factors, may lead to the obsolescence of many languages. Learning a common language may be much more beneficial to one's life than learning languages that are spoken by fewer people. Michael Krauss, one of the more well-known language doomsayers, claimed (1992) that we will lose half of the world's 6,000 languages this century and the rest will be endangered by that point. One could argue here that the loss of lesser-spoken languages like Celtic or Inuit won't affect the vast majority of the world, considering the existence of such languages hardly affects your average human being. However, there is still something to be said about having diversity and holding on to all parts of human history. "There is a need to support minority languages and cultures. Like all 'cultural artefacts', languages give testimony to the unique heritage of humankind" (Modiano 2001, p. 343). One could say that this is similar to biodiversity. Although there are animal and plant species that may not be of any practical use to humankind, they are valued in that they are a part of our world and add something to our lives.

Many also argue that the teaching and learning of English in other parts of the world can have an impact on their cultures. According to Modiano (2001), English Anglo-Americanizes other cultures. "Because English is such a dominant force in world affairs (and the bulwark of Western ideology), there is a danger that its spread dilutes (and 'corrupts') the distinguishing characteristics of other languages and cultures" (Modiano 2001, p 340). I see this occurring in two possible ways, through the teaching or learning process and inasmuch that more people knowing English means that more people will have access to, and be susceptible to, Western culture.

When teaching English as a foreign language, teachers often use subjects, materials, and information that are embedded with Western culture. For example, when teaching vocabulary in the area of government, it is likely that this will involve lessons on American government or on American political ideas and values. It's difficult to imagine an English teacher going to Russia and teaching a lesson on

government, using the Argentinian government as the main example. Not only is Western culture embedded in lessons, but many English-language programs abroad are also geared toward teaching Western culture. The British Council and the U.S. Peace Corps are examples of this. In fact, the second of three goals for the Peace Corps is to promote a better understanding of American culture where volunteers serve. When I served as a volunteer in Ukraine, I taught English using the context of American government, history, society, pop culture, geography, and other subjects very often. This may be useful in that English is used in America but I never taught about other cultures. This does seem to spread American or Western culture through the teaching of English.

The spread of the English language also Anglo-Americanizes the world in that knowing English gives one access to Western culture and media, especially American and British, more than others. As more people learn English, more people will be able to read American news, watch American movies, listen to American music, and learn about America. But knowing English does allow anyone to learn more about the non-English-speaking world. A Ukrainian who learns English is not going to use it to learn more about Angolan culture, knowing English gives preference to learning about English-speaking countries. I mentioned before that, in Ukraine, I taught American culture when teaching English but most of my English students were already influenced by American culture. There are of course other reasons why American culture is so widespread, but knowing English increases access to that culture. Perhaps if Chinese became the world's lingua franca, people throughout the world would be influenced by Chinese media and would be influenced more by Chinese culture.

The third main issue in the rise of English as the world's common language is that it unfairly benefits English-speaking countries and the developed world over the undeveloped world. As Robert Phillipson claims (2001), "English being referred to as a 'universal' lingua franca conceals the fact that the use of English serves the interests of some much better than others" (Phillipson 2001, p. 188). As I mentioned before, knowing English gives one access to information, education, travel, and jobs. But it is much easier for some to acquire these things because they

were either born into being a native English-speaker or they live in a developed country with a high-quality education system that can teach them English. Someone born in The Netherlands will be able to learn English more easily than someone born in Uganda because the The Netherlands has more education funding, better education materials, more technology, and better-trained teachers. This creates more opportunities for the Dutch, while Ugandans remain stuck, their opportunities limited by their lack of access to the world's common language. This seems to add to world inequality, solidifying the gap between the developed and undeveloped world.

English may even create in inequality within countries. In any country, there will be a wealthy class that can afford to educate their children in the English language, whether its by enrolling them into the most prestigious schools in their country or sending them to study abroad in the developed world. Again, these English-speakers will have better opportunities than others in their country, widening the gap. When teaching in Ukraine, I knew a couple wealthy students whose families had enough money to send them to learn English in the UK and they will likely go on to attend the best universities and get the best, most high-paying jobs.

Some would like to “blame” the spread of English and the perceived negative effects of this spread on the U.S. and U.K. English is not actually the most widely-spoken language in the world yet people consider it the world's language, which leads one to believe that its widespread use was decided on or even forced. “Reference to English as a ‘global’ language has therefore much less to do with demography or geography than with decision-making in the contemporary global political and economic system” (Phillipson 2001, p. 189). One could argue that countries like the U.S. and U.K. are forcing English on the world, whether it's through programs like the British Council and Peace Corps, or whether it's through the media or government decisions. From a realist point of view, it is understandable that a country would pursue the spread of its language and culture. “It is legitimate and inevitable that native English-speaking countries will seek to turn this reality to national advantage” (Seaton 1997, p. 381). However, in my opinion, one cannot and

should not attempt to blame the spread of English on anyone. It seems to me that, at this point, the language has a life of its own.

But whether the spread of English is intentional or not, we should make an effort to limit the negative effects and encourage the positive effects. After all, the common usage of English worldwide is important to globalization and benefits global communication, allowing people to better understand each other, work with each other and solve global problems. “Those who discredit the spread of English are nevertheless forced to accept the fact that the international movement requires a language of wider communication” (Modiano 2001, p. 343). So even though there are negative aspects to using English as a common language, its spread should not be prevented, even if that were possible. According to Modiano (2001), this leads to a balancing act, with the need for a “language of wider communication” and “common space” on one hand, and “a sincere desire to preserve cultural diversity” on the other. “These two movements, which are contradictory, are bound to result in conflict and irresolution” (Modiano 2001, p. 343).

There may not be an easy solution to this conflict but one thing that can be done is to teach a neutral form of English that is not owned by any English-speaking country. Modiano (2001) supports this idea:

The teaching and learning of geographically, politically, and culturally ‘neutral’ form of English, which is perceived as a language of wider communication and not as the possession of native speakers, is one of the few options we have at hand if we want to continue to promote English language learning while at the same time attempting to somehow ‘neutralize’ the impact which the spread of English has on the cultural integrity of the learner. (p. 343)

This idea of English no longer belonging to its native speakers emancipates it from Anglo-American culture and allows it to be “appropriated by all” and used to create “global networks where informational and symbolic messages flow without resistance across frontiers” (Kayman 2001, p. 18). English can be taught in addition to other languages, and the teaching of English can involve subject matter and materials that are not laden with Anglo-American culture. And, hopefully, education

systems in undeveloped parts of the world can be improved so that they are not at a disadvantage when learning the world's common language.

There will continue to be conflict between the need to protect languages and cultures and the need to have a common world language in the new globalized world. And there will continue to be inequality in the opportunity to learn English, between the developed and undeveloped worlds. But there is hope that we can conserve other languages, take Anglo-American culture out of the teaching and use of English, and provide equal access to the acquisition of English as a lingua franca.

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