

World Englishes and globalization

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the theoretical concept of world Englishes in light of globalization. The paper briefly outlines phenomena in the organic spread of English around the globe and raises the issue of opportunism in English Language teaching. Ethical implications and implications for research on world Englishes are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In political and academic discourse, globalization as a concept and a reality has come to be universally accepted. Even in the most unlikely quarters, where resistance to globalization could have been expected, such is its irresistible force that its reality is easily conceded. For example, President Fidel Castro of Cuba felt comfortable in proclaiming at a conference of Caribbean Heads of State and Government held in the Dominican Republic in 1998 that “Globalization is an inevitable process. It would be pointless to oppose a law of history” (Grandma International, 1988). Another matter on which there is consensus is the global dominance of English. Evidence of such consensus is shown in studies and surveys. In a survey of the use of English in 20 countries, Fishman (1996: 628) concludes that “the world of large scale commerce, industry, technology, and banking, like the world of certain human sciences and professions, is an international world and it is linguistically dominated by English almost everywhere, regardless of how well established and well-protected local cultures, languages, and identities may otherwise be.” Similarly, the results of a globally administered questionnaire by the British Council (1995) also confirm the global dominance of English. Three of the questions in this survey on the status and use of English and the responses to them are given in Table 1.

The results from the 1,398 respondents (see Table 1) show that as many as 79.2% either disagree or strongly disagree that another language will challenge the role of English as the world’s main language (question 1.1), while 15% either agree or strongly agree. In contrast, in answer to the claim that English will remain the dominant language of world communication (question 1.4), only 2.4% either disagree or strongly disagree, while 96.3% either agree or strongly agree. The response to the claim that English will retain its dominant role in the media (question 1.6) is also similar: Only 3.1% either disagree or strongly disagree, while 94.4% either agree or strongly agree. In short, there is overwhelming acceptance of the global dominance of English.

Acceptance of the dominance of English should not, however, blind one to the need for other languages. Many Anglo-American native speakers tend to be complacent and believe that English is sufficient for most purposes. We live in a multilingual world and there are ready pointers to the obvious need for other languages in everyday communication. For example, the CNN in Atlanta is no longer content with news broadcasts in English but has

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Table 1. Status and use of English

- 1.1 Before the middle of the twenty-first century another language will strongly challenge English for its role as the world’s main language.
- 1.4 English will remain the world’s language for international communication for the next twenty-five years
- 1.6 English will retain its role as the dominant language in world media and communications

	1.1	1.4	1.6
Not answered	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Strongly agree	2.1%	59.7%	40.8%
Agree	12.9%	36.6%	53.6%
No view	5.7%	1.4%	2.5%
Disagree	58.4%	1.4%	2.4%
Strongly disagree	20.8%	1.0%	0.7%

Source: The British Council (1995)

versions in Spanish, German, Danish, in addition to websites in Japanese, Portuguese, Italian, Greek, etc. Many commercial establishments put out notices in other languages in addition to English and have telephone information relayed in several languages for which the customer is prompted to press 1 for English, 2 for Spanish, etc. One reason for making provision for several languages in this manner is that, in commercial transactions, there is need to attract the customer, and, if using a customer’s language will make parting with his or her money easier, so be it! For those who believe that English is sufficient for all, it is sobering to listen to the views of an expert in marketing talking about advertising on the Internet. He says (Dunlap, 1998),

The main purpose of marketing is to get people’s attention and convince them to spend a minute or two looking into a given product or service . . . Getting someone’s attention, if they live in a non-Anglophone country, must take place in their own language. No two ways around this. Once their attention and interest are aroused, the next 30 seconds, when a product or service are described [*sic!*], can indeed take place either in their own language or in English. If they do not respond to English, too bad, they click elsewhere . . . An example will make this clear. Certainly most everyone online in Holland and in Sweden can also read English. But top Internet marketers from both countries state categorically that people in their country do not, in fact, surf the Web in English. They access the Web in Dutch and Swedish. No big surprise. After all, the Web is a media like any other, and people always access media in their own language, not in English . . . even in Holland and in Sweden (probably the most English literate countries in Europe). No one would ever think of producing content or advertising in print media in English in these countries, nor in any non-Anglophone country. Nor would it be thinkable to advertise in English on TV or radio in non-Anglophone countries. Nor would one ever waste one’s money in sending out a direct mailing in English in these countries. So why should the idea ever be entertained to use English in another marketing medium – the Web – to reach people in non-Anglophone countries? The decisive point here is that: Marketing *always* takes place in the language of a country, not in English.

There are even some people, no doubt on the fringe, who advocate the replacement of English as a global language by Esperanto. Advocates of this artificial language claim that it is “neutral” and “easy to learn” (Phillipson, 1999: 31–2) and that the day will come

“when Esperanto will be universally recognized as the international auxiliary language for the whole world” (Zaft, 1996, ch. 23: 1). Although this is an unlikely scenario, at least in the foreseeable future, it does point to the need to recognize that English alone is not enough in the global setting.

WORLD ENGLISHES AND UNIFORMIZATION

The global use of English has meant the spread of certain varieties of English. For example, owing to the influence of pop culture (in particular, pop music), cable television, Hollywood movies, etc., American English and American culture are spreading fast. Not long ago, I happened to tune in to an FM radio station in Lagos, and the way the D-J was carrying on with his American accent and Americanisms, I could not believe that it was an African station. Even names in Nigerian languages were not spared as they were pronounced as if by a foreigner. To a lesser extent, one sees the same trend in the media performance of tele-evangelists, who take their cue from American models. It is not for nothing then that some commentators have started referring to the pervasive American influence as “coca-colanization” (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1996: 284) or “MacDonaldization” (Phillipson, 1999: 27, 28). It is seen as part of the opposition between “Diffusion of English Paradigm” and “Ecology of Language Paradigm” in which there is a contrast, among others, between “Americanization and homogenization of world culture” and “maintenance of languages and cultures” (Tsuda, 1994 as quoted in Tsuda, 2000: 26).

A major challenge for globalization of English is the maintenance of culturally determined varieties of world Englishes in the face of pressures to achieve viable international communication. In some quarters there is a feeling that the more divergent world Englishes are, the less viable they are likely to be as international media of communication. This position is eloquently put by Widdowson (1997: 29) who says: “But if English is to be an international means of communication, the evolution of different and autonomous Englishes would seem to be self-defeating . . . The very adaptations which make the language suited to local communal requirement disqualify it from service as a global means of communication.” The implication of such statements, especially when coupled with the declaration that “EIL is ESP” (which is presented as a disembodied variety of English “concerned with science, technology, business and so on”) is that the only English worth considering as global English is likely to be a native English variety (Widdowson, 1997: 31, 32).

The reality of the form and function of English, particularly in the Outer Circle, is that it is certainly much more than ESP. Global English, if it is to be meaningful, must take account of the changes that have taken place in the course of the spread of the language (Brutt-Griffler, 1998) as well as its expanded role and function (Bamgbose, 1997: 205). Communication across world Englishes has to be seen in terms of accommodation between codes and in a multilingual context. The in-built mechanisms for adaptation and change are a sure guarantee against the emergence of a homogenized variety of English, by whatever name called. One such mechanism is the exploitation of the linguistic resources of the language to form new expressions and new meanings. For example, an expression such as *the outgone president* (formed by analogy with *the outgoing president*), which is found in Nigerian and Ghanaian Englishes, will continue to live side by side with *the past president*, even if it never attains international currency.

OPPORTUNITY VERSUS OPPORTUNISM

Globalization of English necessarily increases the scope and opportunities for the ELT enterprise. Such opportunities include setting up of institutes on language teaching, (particularly for international students), establishment of translation bureaux, designing of programs, and provision of jobs. More teachers of English are needed and many such teachers have found lucrative employment in such places as Saudi Arabia and Japan. Teaching materials in English are multiplied and marketed aggressively. Courses are designed with emphasis on “globalization.” For example, there is a lecture course entitled “The Future of English in the Age of Globalization.” In all this, it appears that there is an exploitation of the concept of globalization. For example there are “globalization jobs” and the impression is often created that such jobs are ideally suited to speakers of English from the Inner Circle. For example, a so-called “Global English School” in Thailand boasts on its Internet home page that “All of our English teachers *are native speakers, teaching natural English as it is spoken in real conversation*” (my italics). If care is not taken, old dogmas may be revived and “linguistic imperialism” (à la Phillipson, 1992) will be resurrected with the commercialization of English. In short, the opportunity offered by globalization must not be allowed to degenerate into opportunism.

WIDENING SCOPE OF RESEARCH

One major consequence of globalization of English is the existence of several varieties of English, which are partly used for similar functions. This situation provides an opportunity not only for research in the different varieties but also for comparative and collaborative research. I envisage a situation in which regional groupings of world Englishes will feature more than individual country-defined Englishes and where there will be a renewed focus on comparison of varieties in the different Circles.

With the growing influence of the Internet, certain conventions have emerged and are spreading to all users of English, for example in sending e-mails and preparing documents by using a word processor. Such new developments will become a legitimate area of investigation. E-mail senders and receivers are, of course, familiar with such changes in orthographic conventions as violation of word division and of initial capital letters (particularly in the writing of names). What impact will the rise of such conventions have on school children, who have to switch between the traditional orthographic conventions and the new Internet conventions? How, in general, will the Internet modify world Englishes?

Another example of external influence concerns the use of the spelling and grammar checker, which most word processors provide. It is well known that most spelling checkers query valid words in the dictionary, while grammar checkers sanction several ungrammatical sentences. But the checker often prompts a writer to change apparently grammatical sentences. Two examples come readily to mind here. First, passive sentences are automatically corrected to active ones (e.g. *Each language is spoken by about one million persons* is changed to *About one million persons speak each language*). Second, practically every relative clause is treated as non-restrictive to be separated from the antecedent by a comma before the *wh*-relative pronoun or alternatively introduced by the relative pronoun “that” (e.g. *Please use one questionnaire for each language which you are going to inform about* is changed to *Please use one questionnaire for each language, which you are going to inform*

about or Please use one questionnaire for each language that you are going to inform about. Since a lot of writing is now done with computers, it will be interesting to see how these conventions affect the style of writing.

In a multilingual context, opportunities for research also extend to the role of world Englishes in relation to other languages and the implications of this for language policy. World Englishes researchers have to be sensitive to the role of other languages in relation to English, since the fortunes of English depend to some extent on the reciprocal development of other languages with which they coexist and interact.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The world Englishes researcher may feel that his or her job has been done if the sort of research discussed above has been done and reported. Far too often, we publish for the attention of our colleagues and to advance knowledge but do not care much about the fate of English in schools. In many countries of the Outer Circle, a constant complaint is that the standard of English is falling and our research does not have any bearing on such a question. I have recently gathered some statistics dealing with the performance of students in the terminal high-school examination in Nigeria (see Table 2). The figures not only show a massive failure in English, they also show declining performance in the five years (1995–1999) covered. Since at least a Credit in English is required for admission to universities, colleges and polytechnics, only an average of about 9.7 percent of all students per year may be said to have done well enough in English to merit admission. The rest either have an ordinary pass or an outright fail. Failure rate is an average of about 64.3 percent every year and, allowing for incomplete or unavailable results in 1998 and 1999, the failure rate gets worse from year to year.

Faced with this dismal picture, how can a world Englishes researcher in Nigeria feel comfortable with academic or theoretical study of his or her subject and not be seriously concerned with the fate of thousands of students who fall by the wayside simply because of English, which is a compulsory subject? In this context, Kachru (1990: 17) observes: “I do not see applied linguistics divorced from the social concerns of our times, nor from the concerns of relevance to the societies in which we live. This view, of course, entails *responsibility*.” If we substitute “world Englishes research” for “applied linguistics,” this statement fits the Nigerian situation perfectly. Something has to be done to combat declining standards of English, and it is part of the social responsibility of scholars of world Englishes in Nigeria (and elsewhere wherever this problem occurs) to contribute to the quest for a solution. Such a solution will include not only provision of improved materials and better classroom instruction but policies regarding quality of teachers and timing of media transition between a child’s first language and English.

IAWE AND THE FUTURE

In the context of globalization, the International Association for World Englishes (IAWE) has a duty to continue to expand its activities to cover the various English-using zones of the world. Fortunately, a useful framework has been established for this in the rotation of annual conferences. What tends to limit rotation on a wider scale appears to be funding. However, we cannot afford to allow money to dictate venues of meetings. If necessary, we must find a way of finding subsidy for unviable venues. For example, beyond

Table 2. Secondary School Certificate examination in Nigeria, performance in English in percentages

	Credit and above	Ordinary pass	Fail	Total
1995	12.4	27.7	59.9	100
1996	11.33	24.03	64.62	99.98
1997	6.54	26.77	66.67	99.98
1998	8.47	21.49	65.53	95.49
1999	9.71	22.59	64.91	97.21

Source: West African Examinations Council (1997, 1999)

Japan and Singapore, I would like to see the conferences move to the Indian subcontinent (which has a substantial number of English-using populations) and Africa.

Another way IAWE can meet the challenge of globalization is to use *World Englishes* consciously to promote concerns of a regional nature. It is possible, for example, to devote entire numbers to world Englishes concerns and research in certain regions in addition to specialized themes that cut across several regions. For example, there could be thematic issues related to standardization, codification, language teaching, language policy, multi-lingualism, and the role of English in relation to other languages. In this connection, the question of social responsibility should feature so that some of the activities of scholars can be focused on issues that affect the community. One such issue, which I have highlighted above, is the question of falling standards as reflected in performance of school graduates. In addition to thematic journal issues, the annual conferences could promote special areas of interest and concern through the choice of conference themes. Happily, since such themes are selected by Local Organizing Committees, there is ample scope for a variety of concerns to be addressed in successive years.

Finally, as a way of recognizing the global spread of our discipline and the contributions made to it by scholars all over the world, I would like IAWE to institute Honorary Fellowships to be given to outstanding scholars of world Englishes. Such honorees can be invited to make special presentations at future IAWE conferences. As I look into the future, I see a vibrant and expanding IAWE whose tentacles will spread across all English-using Circles and in which scholars and researchers in world Englishes will continue to see one another as members of a global family.

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