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Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Changes and Challenges: Reviewing the Configuration of Technology, Global Trends and English Language

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Abstract

This paper deals with some key global trends which may shape the demand for English in the future – from the invention of internet to the restructuring of social and cultural inequality; from globalization to the changing communication needs; from the global spread of English to decreased use of endangered languages; from industrial revolution to consumer culture. These trends interact in complex ways and may produce unexpected social and cultural outcomes. This paper attempts to explore the challenges that English language has to face in world

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communications, international business, and social and cultural affairs in an ever-changing world of technology.

Status of English in Changing World

The current status of English as a world language may seem to be so entrenched and secure that agonizing over ‘the changing realities and future challenges’ might be regarded as no more than a skeptically exaggerated expression. There are reasons why we ought to take stock and reassess the place of English in the world. There are some facts, trends and ideas which may impact the present status of English language. For example, the economic dominance of English-speaking countries – which has helped circulate English in the new market economies of the world – is being eroded as Asian economies grow and become the source, rather than the recipient, of cultural and economic flows. Demographic and educational trends in many countries suggest that languages other than English are already providing significant competition in curricula.

This paper identifies such significant global trends – in technology, language use and mass culture – which may affect the future learning and use of English internationally. During this period of rapid change, it would be foolhardy to imagine that pre-eminent position of English as a world language will not be challenged in some world regions and domains of use as the global trends and attitudes are transformed due to technological advancement. The paper takes stock of the present apparently unassailable position of English in the world and asks whether we can expect its status to remain unchanged during this unprecedented global change.

Lingua Franca of the Past

The history of mankind has witnessed several more or less universal languages or *lingua franca*, such as Latin (and Greek) in the Roman Empire, Medieval Latin in Western Europe, later French and English. No language has been really universal or global, but the current position of English comes closest. What started as the westward migration of a few thousand people from a small Island off Western Europe as limited maritime trade resulted in a language now distributed among a number of power centers, each with its own socio-cultural characteristics and its own set of regional and global interconnections.

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A By-Product

The position of a universal language has always been gained as a by-product of some sort of imperialism, for instance, a nation conquers a large area and more or less assimilates into its own culture, including language, thus forming an empire. The world position of English might have declined with the empire, like the languages of other European colonial powers, such as Portugal and the Netherlands, had it not been for the dramatic rise of the US in the twentieth century as a world superpower. There were, indeed, two other European linguistic contenders which could have established themselves as the global *lingua franca* – French and German. As Eco suggests:

Had Hitler won World War II and had the USA been reduced to a confederation of banana republics, we would probably today use German as a universal vehicular language, and Japanese electronic firms would advertise their products in Hong Kong Airport duty-free shops (*Zollfreie Waren*) in German. (Eco, P. 331)

British and US Impact and New Regional Hierarchies

Thus, the current position of English in the world is the joint outcome of Britain's colonial expansion and the activities of the US. Any considerable shift in the role of the US in the world is likely to have an impact on the use and attractiveness of the English language amongst those for whom it is not a first language. One of the global trends is the development of world regions composed of adjacent countries with strong cultural, economic and political ties. As such regions develop, so it is likely that new regional language hierarchies will appear.

A Consequence of Large-scale People movement in Northern and Western Europe

It is without doubt that the languages that people use in their everyday interactions do not change rapidly, unless a speaker's social circumstances quickly change. People learn languages through life as a consequence of education, employment, technology, migration or increased social mobility. The rise of English language is a fringe consequence of large-scale people movement in Northern and Western Europe, which not only changed the linguistic map but also led to the downfall of the Roman Empire.

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Migration is one of the key factors which have shaped the development of English across the world. Both the slave trade and colonization, during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, moved people and languages: from Europe to America, India, Africa and Australia; from Oceania to Australia and New Zealand.

Reversal of Patterns of Immigration

These patterns of immigration partially reversed in the twentieth century. As a consequence of this changing pattern of movement and decolonization, highly multilingual cities have arisen in countries which imagined themselves to be pre-dominantly monolingual English speaking. Now, some political groups in the US suggest that such movement will have unpredictable effects on language use and this will threaten the hegemony of English.

Urbanization and Migration

Urbanization and migration within countries are some other factors which are likely to have wide-reaching effects on the world's languages. The most important trend in developing countries is likely to be migration to the cities from rural areas. For example, the rapid urbanization in the Shanghai and the Special Economic Zones of China may lead to wider usage of regional *lingua francas*, such as Cantonese or Wu Chinese. Migration to these zones may create a new variety of Wu Chinese with not only a large number of speakers but also powerful economic and cultural support.

Likely Decrease

The shape of the world is rapidly changing – demographic, social, cultural and economic. Technology has transformed the spaces in which we live and work. World is becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent – politically, socially and technologically. This unprecedented change may transform societies and reshape the traditional relations of economic, cultural and political power between the West and the rest of the world which have led world events for several hundred years. As a whole, the world is getting richer, but the future predictions suggest that the proportion of wealth created and spent by the West will decrease

markedly in the next few decades. This may become a substantial factor to affect the economic attractiveness of English language. As Ammon puts his argument:

The language of an economically strong community is attractive to learn because of its business potential. Knowledge of the language potentially opens up the market for producers to penetrate a market if they know the language of the potential customer. (Ammon, P. 30)

Impact of the Patterns of Trade

The patterns of trade may change the patterns of language use. The extent to which other languages becomes important trade *lingua franca* for trade within Asia and Latin America is likely to decide at least the future of business English.

Today's English has its roots in the industrial revolution which began in Europe and in particular in Britain or even earlier – in Renaissance Europe which gave rise to the nation state and national languages, to modern science and institutional structures. Industrial and communications technology created different forms of information giving structures. As a result of rapid advances made in science, engineering, manufacturing and communications, English became the world's language of discovery. Many of the styles and conventions we take for granted today are by-products of 'the information age' that began in the nineteenth century Europe. In fact, the impact of technology on everyday life is not determined by the speed of technological invention and scientific discovery but by the speed of institutional and social change.

Impact of Internet

Internet is considered as the flagship of global English. But, the increasing number of computer hosts in Asia may change the linguistic pattern. Internet, from its origins as a big tool for international communication between global academic elite groups, is now increasingly serving local, cultural and commercial purposes. Now, languages other than English are being used on the internet and this trend is likely to be of growing importance. Internet Society facilitated the use of web pages in different languages in 1996. Language technologies like

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voice-transcription Software and automatic language translation may significantly reduce the need for learning English for the casual internet users.

Satellite TV

Growing numbers of satellite T.V. channels also permit diasporic linguistic groups to receive programming in their first languages. Today, it is not only English language providers who form global-alliance. MBC, an Arabic language station based in London has an agreement with Arab Network of the US. Furthermore, India's home film industry, 'Bollywood', is a successful supplier, turning out three hundred Hindi language films a year and exporting many videos and films to expatriates in West-Asia and Africa.

Impact of Cross-over Genre

There is also emerging a trend of 'cross-over' genres in the music world. MTV channels have a policy of promoting regional Bands that are not American or English. There is no particular loyalty to the English language in trans-national companies, they only follow the market. Now, technology allows localization to be accomplished more rapidly and more cheaply than ever before. It may be quite possible with franchise agreements, licenses and the general extension of large companies into niche markets that the currency of English is eroded.

Endangered Languages and Consequent Death of Languages

A major linguistic issue the world is facing in the twenty-first century is that of the extinction of a substantial proportion of world's languages. Colonial legacy of English is regarded as the main and direct cause of this problem. Furthermore, English is identified with inequality in social, political, economic spheres and now also communications technology. The global high profile of English and its close association with social and economic changes in developing countries are likely to make it a target for those campaigning against the destruction of cultural diversity which language extinction implies.

Languages of Wider Communication

The worldwide spread of English is justified with the argument that languages of wider communication prosper or wither according to the amount of information they contain. English is not the only language currently fulfilling this kind of role. There are many languages other than English like Sanskrit, Chinese, Greek, Arabic, Latin, French, and German which served and in some cases, continue to serve as depositories of privileged information – be it religious, legal or technological – and as vehicles for the transmission and expansion of that information.

Assertion of Linguistic Rights

There is a growing trend and demand for linguistic Rights, within a Human-Rights agenda, arguing that educational provision in a child's mother tongue should be regarded as a basic Human Right. These arguments may be taken into account by policy makers in the countries experiencing demand for regional autonomy or repositioning themselves as regional hubs for trade and services. A thorough observation of these trends suggests a scenario in which the world may turn against the English language, associating it with industrialization and colonization, the destruction of cultures, infringement of basic Human Rights, global cultural imperialism and widening social inequality. In a nutshell, the patterns of use and public attitudes to English which are developing during this age of technology and globalization will have long-term implications for its future use in the world.

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