

Is the Spread of English as a World Language a Positive or a Negative Development?

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Introduction

The proposition whether the spread of English as a world language is a positive or negative development has been a subject of research and debates not only among scholars but also the policy makers of different countries. We see that many countries of the Outer Circle and Expanding Circle, as mentioned by Kachru, quoted in (Crystal, 1997), a US linguist, are giving great importance to the learning and teaching of English. On the other hand, a kind of antagonism and even resistance is gaining ground among some people of these two Circles (Outer and Expanding) who consider the spread of English as a form of Linguistic Imperialism and call for its resistance.

This work will examine the premise that the spread of English as a world language has not only negative sides but also many beneficial impacts on the socio-economic, cultural and linguistic development of the world.

Negative Consequences

Among those who consider the spread of World English a threat, Philipson is prominent. In his book *Linguistic Imperialism*, published in 1992, Philipson shows how the spread of English in the 'Periphery' brings about negative consequences for society, culture and the local languages there. He says that broader social issues like, indigenous cultures and customs of the Periphery are totally neglected and critically affected by the ELT experts of the Inner Circle. In this regard, he remarks, "The professional discourse around ELT disconnects culture from structure by delimiting the focus in language pedagogy to technical matters that is language and

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education in a narrow sense, to the exclusion of social, economic and political matters.” (Philipson, 1992:48)

Global business practices help market ELT. The huge multinational companies like Microsoft and Coca Cola which are mostly owned by Centre nations, write the instructions accompanying their products in English. Government and aid agencies patronise ELT education to help make people skilled in English for a variety of reasons.

Another important point that many put forward to resist the spread of English in the Periphery is that English blunts the creative ability of even the educated segment of society, let alone the illiterate ones. People in the Periphery surrender to the language of the Centre. They consider English to be fit for dealing with higher and sophisticated aspects of life. They develop an adulatory mentality to the Centre language and start to devalue the indigenous culture. What Gilbert Ansre, a Ghanaian sociolinguist, says in this regard is worth quoting. “Linguistic Imperialism has a subtle way of warping the mind, attitudes, and aspirations of even the most noble in a society and of preventing him from appreciating and realising the full potentialities of the indigenous language.”(Ansre, 1979:12-13 qtd. in Philipson)

The dependence of the Periphery on the Centre may be seen to be leading to dependence in other spheres of life. Sometimes, it is not easy to identify which affects which. It is really interesting to see that people in the Periphery consider the news of the BBC or Reuters to be more authentic than those of their own countries. This mentality is created by longstanding allegiance and subordination to everything brought by the Centre into the Periphery, apart from the poor quality of services in native countries and the involved news dissemination.

Positive Effects

Having emphasized the negative sides of the spread of English, this essay will now describe the positive ones. There are many benefits of the spread of English as a world language. We all know that the present-day global status of English is primarily due to two factors: the expansion of British colonial power, which peaked towards the end of the 19th century and the emergence of the US as the leading economic power of the 20th century. The total number of

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people who use English as L1, L2 or EFL in the Inner Circle, Outer Circle and Expanding Circle are nearly twenty million. With so many people using English in various status, it helps create wider international understanding. To share and exchange views and ideas, English works as a strong gateway. This helps people of different countries to become inhabitants of the 'Global Village'. What once was the national heritage of one country, is shared by many nations irrespective of the Circle they are in.

Expansion of Knowledge

The spread of English plays a major role in the expansion of knowledge. As most of the important books of science, technology and other fields of knowledge are written in English, scholars can enter the large domain of knowledge. So, by learning English, they can become enriched and make their own contribution to knowledge. People with knowledge of English have easy access to international job market. Job advertisements in local and international markets look for people with sound working knowledge of English. English is the language of information technology, tourism and travel, international relations and telecommunications. So, opportunities await those who are competent in English. These are the pragmatic value of knowing English which are opened up by the widespread use of English.

Threat to Other Languages and Cultures?

Now the paper will try to explain the fact that the spread of the world English does not threaten the existence and development of local language and culture in the Periphery which many advocates of 'resistance to English' claim it does. So, there is a resistance movement in Periphery to check the spread of English and save the local languages and cultures which they think are being infiltrated into by English.

When languages come in contact with one another, they are enriched through borrowing and lending of elements of language. Local languages in the Periphery are mostly enriched with vocabulary from Centre. But a Centre language also absorbs many words from the Periphery.

Examples are *Yoga* and *Mantra*, Sanskrit in origin, these have found entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Emergence of Local Varieties of English

The spread of English leads to the emergence of local varieties in Periphery. We know that the Indian writers of English have experimented widely with the local varieties of English. Roni Rubdy and Mario Saraceni remark, “But Indian writers have a well-developed local readership, and adopt a different orientation to their writing - which makes them comfortable with their local varieties” (An Interview with Canagrajah taken by Rani Rubdy and Maria Saraceni). However, the emergence of local varieties of English should not be seen as a threat, rather as a springboard for better communication. Appreciating differences and negotiating diversity help varieties of English-using communities bridge the gap of communication.

Note, however, excessive dependence and practice of code switching and code mixing noted in the subcontinent when using native languages certainly is a great concern here.

A Relevant Example from Japan

Ryuko Kubato in the article “The Impact of Globalisation on Language Teaching in Japan” (2002) describes the policy of Japanese Government and attitude of people very clearly. In Japan, the discourse of *Kokusaika* (internationalisation) was initiated by the Japanese government and welcomed by the people. The Education Reform Committee which kept the spirit of this Discourse as the guiding principle for ELT education, recommended acquisition of English to express and explain unambiguously the Japanese viewpoints in the world. That is, it recommended English-based communication mode for the purpose of conveying Japan’s tradition and culture. They believe that international understanding or intercultural understanding is closely linked with ‘learning English.’

English in Multilingual and Multicultural Countries

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The role of English in a multicultural and multilingual country is beneficial as it helps people of various ethnic and linguistic groups to be united. In the article “Language Choice and Cultural Imperialism: A Nigerian Perspective” Joseph Bisong shows that Nigeria which has an estimated number of 450 different languages, gave English the status of official language which it still enjoys after 45 years of independence. The spread of English there has not eliminated 450 different languages in Nigeria.

Many Nigerian parents send their children to English-medium schools precisely to benefit from the prevailing and potential opportunities that knowledge of English may yield. Bisong remarks, “Why settle for monolingualism in a society that is constantly in a flux, when you can be multilingual and more at ease with a richer linguistic repertoire and an expanding consciousness?” (1994:125). So, to maximise their chances of success in a multilingual society, parents in Periphery go for English-medium schools and the fact is that teaching English for 2-3 hours in school could not threaten or supplant the non-stop process of acquiring competence in their mother tongue. In countries like Nigeria, China, and India, the ‘principal Ingredient’ of unification and strong unity is the English Language. India, a country of over a billion people, has many hundreds of local dialects and languages. In such a complicated situation, the State has given English the official language status to facilitate easy communication.

Suitable for Creative Work

English is also a very suitable language for creative work. That is why we find a good number of successful writers in the Caribbean and Asia whose excellence is on par with native English creative writers. Bisong in this context cites the example of Joseph Conrad. Conrad’s choice of English to write in was really fortunate for the development of the English novel. So, the objection against the use of English that it stifles the creative ability of writers of Periphery is ill-founded.

Conclusion

After evaluating the arguments for and against the spread of English as a world language, it appears that it is positively accepted and English works well in a multicultural and multilingual society and there it works as a means of wider assimilation and unification. The Periphery countries where English is resisted on the plea that it eliminates local languages cannot themselves protect their own small indigenous languages from extinction. If they could do so, everyday 3-4 minority languages would not have died out from the world. So, the threat may come from any powerful first language, not simply English.

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