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MA - Applied Linguistics

Year 1 Module 1 Assessment Task SO/12/07 (January 2013)

Assignment SO/12/07

The following quotations may be seen as representing a range of opinion in a debate about the role of English as an international language:

i) 'English is neutral'

...since no cultural requirements are tied to the learning of English, you can learn it and use it without having to subscribe to another set of values [...] English is the least localized of all the languages in the world today. Spoken almost everywhere in the world to some degree, and tied to no particular social, political, economic or religious system, or to a specific racial or cultural group, English belongs to everyone or to no one, or it at least is quite often regarded as having this property.

Ronald Wardaugh (1987) *Languages in Competition: Dominance, diversity and decline*. Blackwell

ii) 'English is imperialist'

What is at stake when English spreads is not merely the substitution or displacement of one language by another but the imposition of new 'mental structures' through English. This is in fact an intrinsic part of 'modernization' and 'nation-building', a logical consequence of ELT. Yet the implications of this have scarcely penetrated into ELT research or teaching methodology. Cross-cultural studies have never formed part of the core of ELT as an academic discipline, nor even any principled consideration of what educational implications might follow from an awareness of this aspect of English linguistic imperialism.

Robert Phillipson (1992) *Linguistic Imperialism*. OUP

iii) 'English is democratic'

there have been comments made about other structural aspects, too, such as the absence in English grammar of a system of coding social class differences, which make the language appear more 'democratic' to those who speak a language (e.g. Javanese) that does express an intricate system of class relationships.

David Crystal (1997) *English as a Global Language*. CUP

What is your opinion? Discuss, with reference to the roles played by language in the development and maintenance of 'society' and of 'culture'. You may refer to any non-English speaking society with which you are familiar, in order to exemplify your points.

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1. Introduction

That the English language today holds a specific and prominent role in the world can be evidenced not just in the daily lives of a large number of people worldwide – Crystal (1997), estimates 85% of international organisations and 99% of European organisations have English as their working language and Graddol (2000) states that some 1.5 billion people worldwide have English as a first or second language or are currently studying English as a foreign language – but also through the influence that has led to many written works, journals and books devoted to explaining the situation. Words such as ‘*Lingua Franca*’ (Graddol, 2000); ‘*Pragmatic*’ (Crystal, 1997); ‘*Imperialist*’ (Phillipson, 1992); ‘*Elitist*’ (Pennycook, 2001); ‘*Empowering*’ (Wardhaugh, 2010) even ‘*Killer language*’ (Phillippson, 2008) attempt to show how the use of English in the development and maintenance of society and culture in the world today can be easily explained and categorised. However, the fact that such a diverse list of titles exists demonstrates that such use of the language is a very diverse and complex socio-cultural process.

What I am going to discuss in this assignment is the role that English plays in the world today with particular reference to the cultural and societal functions. I will argue, firstly, that languages are abstract and evolve naturally to adapt to socio-cultural situations. I will then go on to show how, far from being an imperialist strategy, English today has been adopted as a practical and neutral tool in many socio-cultural domains to help people adapt to changes worldwide in areas such as technology, travel and business. I will also show that English can often, but not always, provide a certain cultural democracy and has a creativity that allows people to facilitate linguistic changes away from a dependency on local monolingual structures.

2. What is a language?

2.1 A natural or man-made facility

Rousseau (1756) is recognised as showing that a language is the symbol of a nation state in the sense that it is inextricably linked to the culture and promotion of that state. However, he also suggests that the need to communicate is primordial and linked to a human's natural development; that the development of communication, and therefore language, is governed by the needs of each situation. This idea of a natural evolution is more recently stated by Montgomery (2008: 123) when he suggests that language '*... varies in line with the situation that we find ourselves in vis: the need to communicate*'. Crystal (1997) further states that language development comes about because we choose it rather than because it has been imposed.

That few languages today are the same as there were 1000 years ago is also evidence that the evolution of languages may well be more of a natural process of adaptation and not the fact, as suggested by Phillipson (2008); Holmes (2008); and Pennycook (2001), that the development of languages is always linked to dominant cultures. Cultural dominance changes over time but not always in tandem with the language – Latin continued to be widely used long after the decline of the Roman Empire and Spanish is now the dominant language in South America with independent cultural influence prevailing in each country rather than directly from Spain. It can be seen therefore that languages continue to be adapted to the cultures that use them rather than retaining intentional and specific imperialist links to a dominant culture.

The fact the English plays such an influential role in the world today may well have certain origins in the cultural and historical dominance of Anglophone cultures, but I would argue that its use today owes little to the dominant policies of Washington or London, and more to a simple

adaptation in the need to communicate more widely with a diversely cultural international community brought about by recent developments in technology, business and travel. It would appear that these have been natural and reactive socio-cultural changes that have happened for simple and practical reasons.

2.2 An adaptive and abstract method

The differences of speech as a method of communication which link people in all socio-cultural environments, particularly in the development and maintenance of identity within cultures, are hugely varied. They are also often random and, according to Wardhaugh (2010), make direct linking of language with cultures contentious. Wardhaugh also states that *'such language variety and randomness demonstrate that it is not possible to see language as a fixed homogeneous item'*, such as may well be required to support the imperialist nation-building argument. Language can be therefore seen as a natural and chosen communicative process inextricably linked to any particular socio-cultural situation and each situation requires adaptive handling for communicative means. Indeed, as Basong (1995) demonstrated, language use is a *"complex situational process encompassing a multitude of inter-connecting dynamics"*.

With an ever more complex global socio-linguistic environment Basongs's theory is likely to be increasingly evident as socio-linguistic changes are reflected in socio-cultural development worldwide. When attempting to determine and define the role of English in the world, it is clear that communication through language in such socio-cultural complexity can only be achieved through an abstract adaptation of language driven by the needs of individual socio-cultural environments.

3. Personal Acquisition

If language is random and natural, how and why is it acquired and for what reasons do some people remain monolingual and or decide to become bi- or multi-lingual? From my own early experience, my chosen teenage vernacular was often used to ensure I belonged to my direct socio-cultural peer group and was at odds with my parents desire that I should “*speak properly*”. As a working adult, where clear and concise inter-personal communication was imperative for safety, my language metamorphosed again, determined by the socio-cultural rules of my professional environment. In more recent years, it was my own desire to advance in my professional life that drove me to speak another language. It was directly governed by personal motivation and led me to greater understanding of new socio-cultural environments both privately and professionally. It also enabled me to gain empathy with my students in their attempts to learn English. I have therefore reacted through natural choice and desire and/or need for adaptation to the socio-cultural environments I have found myself in.

Graddol (2000: 16) acknowledges that language can be achieved by ‘*personal ambition and (...)personality*’. Basong (1995) also highlights the importance of individual choice when he talks about those who choose ‘*relevance and prominence*’ and who go on wilfully to learn a language. Graddol (2000: 17) notes further that the main drivers of language change and acquisition are ‘*social and material*’. The development and influence of English can thus be correlated to any particular socio-cultural situation and each situation determines its own appropriate handling.

4. English as a neutral tool.

4.1 A default mechanism

Socio-cultural changes in recent years, such as that brought about by technology and travel as well as the effects of this on other aspects of culture such as business and communications, have changed the dynamics of language acquisition. Graddol (2000) suggests that English has been heavily influential in this. Social networks and travel have enabled, or maybe obliged, people in the last 30 years to seek cultural dependence away from a local environment and into an international world and English has provided a conduit to allow this to happen. People are therefore no longer as attracted and bound by local culture, and as such, potentially monolingual cultures as they were. Indeed this role of English playing such a prominent role in the internationalisation of culture was stated by Wardhaugh (2010: Ch 15) in that '*The use of English (...) is intercultural communication; it presupposes the existence of separate cultures (...) it is a tool for communication*'.

The phrase *lingua franca* which is often used to label the role of English was indeed defined by UNESCO in 1953 as '*a language which is used habitually by people whose mother tongues are different in order to facilitate communication between them*' (Wardhaugh 2010: Ch 3). When we see that English has been adapted by default as the used language for communication by the European Union, we can start to see evidence of the acceptance of the English language as a logical means to an end. There are thus, as Fennell (2001) suggests, indications of a practical use for the spread of English.

English has also demonstrated a certain neutrality, firstly in promoting cultural development in allowing a way for identity and community to further individual cultures beyond their initial

boundaries such as allowing the Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, to use English not like a native speaker but to be adapted and used to *'carry the weight of his African experience'* (Basong 1995: 126). Secondly within the European Parliament, the use of English as a means of communicating between people of many different first languages has formed a kind of cross-border neutral 'euro'-English. Users not having English as an L1 facilitate other speakers by the process of 'accommodation'; using differing speech patterns, such as simplified sentence constructions, avoidance of idioms and clearer articulation (Crystal, 2012).

This reasoning appears even more logical and plausible when, as Graddol (2006 : 116) states, English *'allows adaptability and creativity to fit neatly into local languages and code switching'*. Sergeant (2012: 35) also promotes the idea that English *'auto-develops to fit into the context and the surroundings of where it is used'*. Montgomery (2008) further demonstrates that English has a way of fitting into and adapting to situations when needed. .

4.2 Simple practicality

Crystal (2012) refers to English having been adopted and adapted by polyglot countries such as Singapore, India, the Philippines, and Papua New Guinea and this maybe shows a better expression of practicality in cultures using external elements for internal aims. Indeed it would seem that such countries show an adaptability to integrate English into their societies whilst retaining the cultural importance of their own language.

It could be argued that the neutrality of English enhances its effectiveness as the accepted tool of communication as demonstrated by its use in many international communities such as: academic, scientific, transport, and business as a common language. This effective neutrality is further

enhanced by the use of English as a common language in technology and communications and thus has a direct impact on the development and maintenance of culture and society (Fennell, 2001).

4.3 A local and an international language

Kachru (1997) fed the imperialist argument by demonstrating the tier of influence that English has had directly affecting and influencing social development and maintenance of culture in post-colonial societies. I would argue, however, that this evaluation is not a true reflection of the growing influence of English in the world today.

Even as far back as 1987, Wardhaugh stated that English is not tied to any '*particular social, political, economic or religious system, or to a specific racial or cultural group*, and that it *belongs to everyone or to no one*'. More recently, Graddol (1997: 6) suggested that such growth in the diversity of English around the world encourages both the development of '*standardised international (...) and hybrid local forms*' and further stated (2000) that English will become more adjustable to people's global needs worldwide because of the lack of a standard form. He further claims (2000: 36) that English '*flows and colonises with and into other languages*' and '*the primary movers are the people who use them*'. Sergeant (2012) believes that the influence English has on the world today and the resultant diverse uses in such an internationalist context have lead to a re-conceptualisation of the language. Indeed with the rapid expansion of affordable travel (in Europe, India and China, particularly) and more accessible communications worldwide, both evolving with English as a key component, it is very unlikely that there are many countries and regions not affected in some way by such influences of English on their socio-cultural evolution.

5. English as an imperialist tool

5.1 English – a historical perspective

As we have seen above, language acquisition and development is a complex process at once influenced by and for socio-cultural elements with many inter-linked components. English itself had to fight to be re-established in England following cultural domination firstly by Latin through the church and then French following the Norman invasion in 1066. However, overseas trade routes and the developing British Empire in the 17th and 18th centuries created a conduit that enabled English to be used in many parts of the world whilst at the same time borrowing in from other languages (Crystal, 1997). Continuing expansion through the industrial revolution and subsequently through American expansionism and technological advancement in the 20th Century meant that English has continuously been involved in an increasingly complex worldwide socio-cultural development for almost 500 years.

Fennell (2001: 244) simplifies the issue by suggesting that English was '*in the right place at the right time*' and that such development and expansion of the language was an '*accident of history*'. However Phillipson (2008: 254) sees English as an '*imperialist and intentionally dominating tool central to the maintenance of British empirical power*'. Indeed to look further and see that in the 1950s, in Kenya – at the time still a British Colony– the use of any language other than English was a punishable offence (Sergeant: 2012). We can thus see some evidence that the cultural development and maintenance of English has not always been necessarily natural or random.

It is certainly not unrealistic to see that the internationalisation of culture (films, popular music, and television) has been fuelled by the English language. However since the Second World War,

despite criticisms of an all pervading American-industry-led global onslaught, English has been adapted into a more practical and diverse socio-cultural use worldwide.

Phillipson (2008) further suggests that English learning is central to encompassing the US ideal of a global superpower, which may well infer an Orwellian type global speak, inextricably linked to unilateral cultural empowerment based on a single model. However, when Wardhaugh (2010: Ch 1), notes that *'variation is an inherent characteristic of all languages at all times'* it would appear difficult to comprehend an English imperially imposed. Such determination would surely require standardisation and as such would be inherently difficult to ensure. Wardhaugh (2010: Ch 2), also suggests that

'the standard variety of any language is actually only the preferred dialect of that language: Parisian French, Florentine Italian, or the Zanzibar variety of Swahili in Tanzania. It is the variety that has been chosen for some reason, perhaps political, social, religious, or economic, or some combination of reasons, to serve either as the model or norm for other varieties. It is the empowered variety'.

5.2 Towards post-colonial evolution

It seems difficult to justify the theory that English has been used as an imperialistic tool to further the interests of monolingual nation states given the global diversity and pluralism that English has assumed. Such a determined ideology as linguistic imperialism, would require a large degree of complicity and standardisation to succeed. As Sergeant (2012: 107) highlights *'even colonisation lead to different Englishes around the world'*. Such socio-cultural diversity would thus undermine the validity of English as a deliberate tool of imperialism. When Phillipson (2008) suggests that all socio-cultural activities, in order to be publicised and integrated, must be

driven by a language conduit, it would seem probable that English, was more a manipulated tool used in the goal of imperialism, rather than a designed component of an imperialist plan.

Pennycook (1998) believes that English is a dominant medium subtly promoted by nationally funded educational programmes. It may, however, appear a hard argument to justify as government policies are often carefully hidden in marketable rhetoric anyway to help justify their aims. Even Pennycook (2001) himself acknowledges that the old imperialist argument is hard to sustain as English takes on a new diverse and functional role in the world.

If we take the direct example of certain post-colonial African states, countries where deliberate forced language policy was enacted, things are no less opaque today. Wardhaugh (2010: Ch 15) states that English '*serves many as an internal working language but is also still regarded as the language of mobility. It (...) opens up access to the world outside the state*'. It may be possible to argue that this situation demonstrates a legacy of an imperial past but an intentional maintenance of the colonial hierarchy by the leaders of the post colonial systems. So, on the one hand it could be argued that the use of English is tied very closely to the colonial legacy but, conversely, that it has been retained by the socio-cultural structure of the new independent state to enable the countries to develop their own cultures in a post-colonial more culturally diverse world.

Even extreme theories, such as that suggested by Mühlhäusler (1996, cited in Wardhaugh, 2010: Ch 15) that English effectively '*kills*' other indigenous languages. This appears somewhat difficult to justify given the abstract evolution of language and its effect on culture and society. I would suggest that it is more realistic to state that languages (such as Cornish and Manx) and their attached cultural elements may decline in importance and use to the point where they are no

longer used, as other languages become more adaptable and useful. This has been the case with English in the cases of Manx and Cornish.

5.3 Standardisation and LPP – the requirements of imposition.

It would appear most probable that any attempt to colonise the English language into such an imperialist doctrine aimed at unifying socio-cultural development would require quite intensive language planning policies closely linked to strict cultural norms. It seems unlikely that such a determined policy would succeed without some kind of enforced cohesion. Fennell (2001) is unequivocal when she claims that a planned language is just simply not practical. Diversity is too great and too abstract to allow any kind of imperialist language planning strong enough to withstand intentional cultural development. Gupta (2001, cited in Wardhaugh 2010: Ch 15) declares: *'it is impractical, unrealistic, and even futile to talk of British or American norms or models in such a vast and diverse country (India) where millions of people learn, use and interact in English. What we therefore need (...) is a pan-Indian "norm" (...) to which no "stigma" is attached'*.

Here it is quite clear to see a determined effort to use English as an advantageous tool in the development and maintenance of Indian society and to ensure that it is influenced by Indian cultural policy. It is not born out of any imperialist doctrine and demonstrates the diverse nature of how one language can be exploited rather than imposed.

6. A linguistic tool for democracy

6.1 A question of honorifics

Notwithstanding the previous arguments for practicality, neutrality and imperialism, it is worth making a final observation from Crystal (1997) about the role of English today in that it is ‘*democratic*’. It avoids a fine web of social differences and is not governed by the honorifics that attach other languages to specific cultures. However one thing that this analysis does not seem to incorporate is the idea of ‘*dangers in cross-cultural communication when different relationships are expressed through what appears, superficially at least, to be the same address system*’ (Wardhaugh 2010: Ch 11). Not taking into account how one system of honorifics applies within another can create inter-cultural problems. The apparent democracy of one system cannot necessarily be easily transposed into another. From personal experience the informal/formal differentiation in French of *tu* & *vous* is much more strictly applied in France than, for example, in the French speaking part of Switzerland. Written communication similarly in France still uses extremely long and formal polite address system whereas in the French speaking part of Switzerland, polite forms are much more succinct.

It could be argued therefore that English is too democratic in terms of how it seems to lack any culturally attached system of address. However, forms of initial address used in radio communication still refer to “*Sir*” and “*Madam*” for polite requests and responses, although this would sound overly polite in everyday social interaction. Meal times in Switzerland can also show the problems of cross-cultural honorifics. The respectful French “*bon appétit*” or Swiss German “*en guete*” do not have an acceptable form in English. Attempts to use “*enjoy your meal*” or simply “*enjoy*” sound false and insincere, but non-English L1 speakers feel they should say

something. This is an innocuous example and it may also be less important in polyglot than monoglot cultures where imposition of a new language is required.

However, because such linguistic elements of English could pose problems for those more used to a strict honorific interpretation or complex cultural distinctions, it is not therefore easy to address English as simply a more democratic language, when removing such cultural address would show disrespect, confusion or even insults. It could be argued that the use of English enables a certain freedom to allow a person the chance to avoid certain social norms where other languages adhere too rigidly to socio-cultural positions. Such situations would not therefore necessarily have a negative effect on those involved and in this sense it is likely that English could act as a democratic tool. Whether or not the ‘democratic’ description can be universally attributed, however, would depend on the overall context of individual situations.

6.2 Pluricentric manipulation

Democracy in a language originates also in specific socio-linguistic areas. Kachru and Nelson (1997: 9) maintain that English is a ‘*pluricentric*’ language, in that it has ‘*more than one set of norms for creativity*’. It could therefore be easily manipulated to match the requirements of different socio-linguistic situations. In this sense the democratic label is much easier to sustain. Graddol (2006) also says the international extent of English allows adaptability and creativity to fit neatly into local languages.

In Tok Pisin, English has not only influenced the language lexically but also grammatically with the peppered use of, amongst others, the plural morpheme ‘s’. Of course this has led to criticism of those wishing to avoid such importation into a relatively new and socially developed language.

Wardhaugh (2010: Ch 3) even states that '*morphophonemic variation*' in English makes the language complicated and, not obvious to non-English speakers when searching for language. It is clear that English has the ability to be used creatively and therefore a relatively easy option to be used as a multi-functional language, but it is by no means certain that it is easier to learn than other languages.

7. Conclusion

English as a language has been part of cultural and social development worldwide for over 500 years. Where once the language could have been said to be linked to imperialist expansion, it has more recently taken on a more neutral and pragmatic role as a means of communication at a time when the internationalisation of cultures and society has loosened the reliance on local cultures and fostered cultural development less constrained by local social norms. With the continuing expansion of technology and travel and the integrated internationalisation of commerce, the effects on society and culture and the need to communicate inter-culturally has generated the use of a lingua franca: it is clear that English has been adopted and adapted to facilitate this. Whether this will be at the expense of the richness and diversity that inter-cultural relationships bring is difficult to say, but I would argue that it is already acting as a unifying force for greater cultural understanding and advancement. In that sense it is both neutral and democratic at the same time.

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