Kwansei Gakuin University
Humanities Review
Vol.20, 2015
Nishinomiya, Japan

English as a Lingua Franca: Globalization, Ownership, and the Diversification of English

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I. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world in which people from a variety of different geographical and linguistic backgrounds must communicate with one another daily, the need for a global lingua franca is obvious. The economic and cultural dominance of America over the last century, accompanied by the lingering influences of the colonial British Empire, have leveraged the position of English as the common language of international communication. However, as English continues to grow in importance among non-native speakers of the language, a number of questions arise: what are the current challenges to English's position as a global lingua franca? Who does it serve? Can English exist as a global lingua franca without marginalizing the local languages of the countries into which it is introduced? This paper looks to examine the salient points and contradictory voices emerging in relation to English's position as the global language.

II. English as a Lingua Franca

To be considered a true 'global language', Crystal (1998, 2006) argues that a language must possess three characteristics: that the majority of people in some countries use it as their native-language, that it has been widely adopted as an official language, and that that it is given priority in language teaching around the world. It is fair to say that at present, English meets all of these criteria.

Of particular relevance to the growth of English as a lingua franca is that non-native speakers using English as a means of communication "are greater in number than the traditionally understood [native speakers] who use English as their sole or primary language of communication" (Canagarajah, 2007, p. 925).

English is being utilized across a variety of industries as the common language in international business and is increasingly being adopted in transnational bodies such as the UN. As non-native speakers (NNSs) increasingly account for a larger percentage of the overall English-speaking population, a very practical and obvious economic advantage of adopting English as a lingua franca emerges. Etzioni (2008) argues that the adoption of the English language as a lingua franca would "greatly reduce the costs of conducting transactions and communications across national borders" (p. 155). Etzioni also notes that the costs associated with the policy of multilingualism endorsed by the EU currently account for a striking 13% of the EU's administrative budget in translation and interpretation services.

Some, such as Gil (2011), argue that given the increasing importance of China as a global economic and cultural center of power, Standard Chinese might replace English as the global lingua franca. Before achieving this goal; however, there are a number of significant obstacles for the primary Chinese language to overcome. Gil argues that despite the increasing popularity of Chinese language classes around the world, the language has yet to meet the three characteristics outlined by Crystal (1998, 2006) earlier. Crystal also notes that while English is an official or co-official language in 70 countries, as well as a priority language in more than 100, Standard Chinese is only the official language amongst the populations of China, Taiwan and Singapore. This brings serious doubt as to whether the will or desire to adopt Standard Chinese as a priority language in other countries exists. Contributing to this skepticism is the fact that English is already a priority language in China itself. In discussing the emerging prominence of English in China, Nunan (2003) reflects on an interview with a Chinese informant working in the publishing industry, and was told that "there were 600,000 new enrolments in private-conversation schools every 4 to 6 months" (p. 595). With these points considered, it is hard to imagine Standard Chinese supplanting English as the common global language.

Another important question is whether the English spoken by native speakers should be the ideal target for which English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) speakers aim to attain, or if in fact, an expert ELF user is a more pragmatic ideal. Elder and Davies (2006) argue that "(s)trict adherence to native speaker norms of correctness are arguably unreasonable and irrelevant to the target language construct, given that successful communication does not depend on them" (p. 288). They then go on to propose a series of potential replacements for standardized tests developed in English-speaking countries, which would afford greater flexibility to regional variations of English and place greater emphasis on performance, rather than grammatical accuracy. House (2003), in turn, argues that the 'yardstick' for comparison should be an "expert in ELF use, a stable

multi-lingual speaker under comparable socio-cultural and historical conditions of language use, and with comparable goals for interaction" (p. 573). Accepting regional variations of English, rather than perceiving them as being deficient, would afford the ELF a greater degree of ownership over the language. Designing tests that consider linguistic or cultural variations that may extend from the users' first language (L1) would help reduce the hegemony of English as a lingua franca and uproot some of its colonial underpinnings.

III. Who Does the Lingua Franca Serve?

Phillipson (2001) argues that the current move to assert English as the global lingua franca is being done at the behest of transnational corporations intent on expanding their business and "producing consumers rather than critical citizens" (p. 190). He also argues that English serves the interests of select stakeholders and "ignores the fact that a majority of the world's citizens do not speak English" (Phillipson, 2001, p. 188). Certainly, the very structure of many education systems - such as in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan - seem to be designed in order to have students perform well on standardized tests, for example, TOEIC and TOEFL. The tests then, in turn, determine students' value as English speakers when they begin job-hunting; however, the tests do little to measure students' communicative ability and thus serve the interests of corporations rather than students (Suzuki & Daza, 2004). Speaking on this trend, Shumar (1997) argues that university education is increasingly seen as a commodity rather than as a public good serving the needs of society.

English language education has become a great source of revenue for English-speaking countries, and a trend has seen even non-English speaking countries trying to appropriate English for financial gain. It speaks volumes to note that in Asia "'international' institutions nowadays largely means having English as the medium of instruction" (Phan, 2013, p. 162). One could argue that there is something positive to take from this, as EFL users are taking ownership of English, and in doing so, they can reap the rewards that have previously only benefitted the countries of native speakers. However, Phan (2013) also notes that "(t)he growing commercialization of higher education has been coupled with the commodification of English which is also associated with the continuing belief that 'the West is better'" (p. 164). This commodification and idealization of English also has substantive consequences on education, sometimes to the detriment of the people education is meant to benefit. This point is consistent with Phillipson's (2001) argument that English textbooks serve to "project western life-styles as 'objects of admiration and envy'" (p.195).

One example of the harmful effects of the commodification of education is addressed in Choi's (2010) study of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong's only university where Standard Chinese is the primary medium of instruction. Prior to 2005, the CUHK administration had quietly proposed that university faculties move toward using English as the medium of instruction, a move which Choi argues contradicts the university's founding principle of teaching in Standard Chinese. The issue was brought to the forefront by the university's student union, and protests by the student group served as a catalyst for condemnation from several academics and public figures, including several prominent academics from outside the territory (Choi, 2010). The resistance to this change forced the administration to compromise and offer a tiered language system that allowed greater inclusion of Standard Chinese, however Choi still argues that the "hierarchizing of the two languages clearly endorsed and reinforced the English hegemony" (p. 248). This case demonstrates that despite being able to appropriate English to their own benefit, the commodification of English can still pose a threat to education outside the English-speaking world and can encourage university administrations to operate like businesses, rather than as centers of academia that serve the community.

Choi (2010) also notes the growing trend of having a "hierarchical division between faculty closer to the market and those further from it, as well as the increased number of part-timers who take up the instruction work 'left behind'" (p. 235). This is of particular interest given the emerging trends in post-secondary language education in Japan. Currently, a standard requirement for becoming employed at a higher education institution in Japan is having a completed master's degree; however, new administrative measures have seen universities streamline their staff, directly hiring or outsourcing English classes to lower-cost English teachers or third-party companies. Additionally, some institutions are reducing the number of tenured faculty members (Mulvey, 2010). While this may be beneficial for the finances of institutions in the short-term, it is making the job market more competitive for those who are more experienced and qualified. This can result in teachers with smaller class sizes, but fewer attainable faculty positions that involve decision-making power and research budgets. Unfortunately, this trend might continue to the detriment of students.

IV. The Threat of the Lingua Franca to Local Languages

A common area of concern, in regards to the adoption of a global lingua franca, is that it may reduce the use and importance of local languages and push them towards extinction. Phillipson (2001) states that the power of American pop

culture, combined with U.S. and British corporate interests "embody and entail hegemonizing processes that tend to render the use of English 'natural' and 'normal', and to marginalize other language" (p. 191). The question one must ask then is this: does the adoption of a lingua franca pose a risk to smaller, local languages?

House (2003) distinguishes two kinds of language: languages for communication and languages for identification. A speaker's L1 is a binding force between them and their community and culture, and contributes to these communities' shared sense of identity. Contrary to Phillipson's (2001) argument that the English global lingua franca endangers local languages, House asserts that "the very spread of ELF may stimulate members of minority languages to insist on their own local language for emotional binding to their own culture" (p. 561). House envisions ELF serving as an inter-ethnic language that allows different groups to maintain their mother tongue, while avoiding being segregated into their own particular ethnic community. A complimentary idea to House's argument proposed by Etzioni (2008) sees a two-tiered system wherein populations engage with their mother language in all things related to identity (literature, the arts, history, culture), while learning a common second language. Under such a system "one would seek not to replace particularistic languages that are constitutive of various communities, but rather to add a universal language to them" (Etzioni, p. 118).

Mufwene (2010) argues that in Africa, the threat to smaller, local languages is "typically felt or feared from major indigenous languages…rather than from European languages typically associated with colonization and globalization" (p. 917). Indeed, in countries throughout Africa or in India, where there are a variety of different languages spoken, English may actually serve to protect indigenous languages from being eradicated by more commonly spoken local languages. House (2003) goes so far as to state that arguments such as the one made by Phillipson "may be seen as patronizing since they imply that ELF users do not know what is in their interest" (p. 560).

V. Conclusion

While the criticism of the hegemonic and colonialist influences of English as a global lingua franca may carry some weight, the global community can benefit from using English as a shared language. For countless reasons, English has come to be the most widely spoken language in the world and it is the only language that constitutes a global lingua franca, according to the criteria offered by Crystal (1998, 2006). Etzioni (2008) draws comparisons to the American railroad system.

Though it was built at a great cost to human life and initially had a negative impact on the communities through which it was built, it is now a cornerstone of American industry and economy, providing a large source of jobs to Americans. Similarly, although the spread of English may have resulted from a colonial past, it now stands as a means of connecting people across borders and cultures, and in doing so, allows us greater opportunity to interact with those from outside our community.

Furthermore, having a common language may actually be of benefit in maintaining local culture and heritage, so long as the lingua franca is instituted in such a way that it does not replace local languages or relegate them to a lesser role. This can be accomplished through a system such as the one Etzioni proposes, in which both the local language and the lingua franca are taught and used within a two-tiered system that recognizes the local language as a part of cultural identity. Already, language education systems, such as the one in the Philippines, have demonstrated that the lingua franca can be taught while respecting and affording time to indigenous languages.

VI. References

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