

A Panoramic View of the Global Mission of the English Language, and its Implication towards One-Voice Trend

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Abstract

The widespread use of English is a consequence of England's adventurous quest for knowledge of foreign lands culminating in colonizing the nationals of her contact missions, and transplanting her cultural patterns via English taught by missionaries and subsequently by government agents. This paper therefore examines the factors that are gradually but satisfactorily edging the English language towards becoming a world language making nations nearly speak with one voice. The satisfactory results of the spread are the extermination of hundreds of millions of languages English has come in contact with, the emergence of new Englishes conditioned after the cultural colorations of speakers outside native domains, and the international cohesion of speakers who speak with one voice in times of crises. The spread of the language along with its consequences is a one-voice trend making the world a global village.

Keywords: panoramic, global, mission, implication, one-voice, trend

1.1 Introduction

The English language is spoken in Europe, North America, South America, Africa, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand collectively called the seven continents of the world. According to Hornby (2005), "English is spoken as a first language by more than 300 million people throughout the world, and used as a second language by as many, if not more". He further avers that "one in five of the world's population speaks English with some degree of competence. It is an official or semi-official language in over 70 countries, and it plays a significant role in many more". Lending credence to the unrestricted spread of English in the world, Professor Barbara Seidhofer of the University of Vienna in Hornby (2005) states:

At the beginning of the 21st century, as a result of the unprecedented global spread of English, roughly only one of every four user of the language in the world is a native speaker of it. This means that most interactions in English take place among 'non-native' speakers of the language who share neither a common first language nor a common first culture, and who use English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) as their chosen language of communication.

This authoritative enunciation singles the language out as the foremost vehicle of international relations, cultural transmissions, and social expressions. This privileged pedestal makes it a prioritized medium of communication by such world bodies as the United Nations Organization, European Union, African Union, etc. This exulted recognition amply manifests in facilities facilitating communication with the outside world while one sits comfortably anywhere. Equipment for information technology – computers, GSMs, radios, televisions – is generally configured in English letters (orthography) and English sound systems (phonetic symbols). The language as well has become a crisis-averting medium in countries with heterogeneous cultures and multifarious languages. These countries, like Nigeria where no indigenous language is accepted as a national language, have had recourse to English to check ethnic rivalries, minorities' suspicions, and to deeply entrench unity and peace in the substructures holding balancingly these different tribes and tongues standing only on political brotherhood.

The international spread, the local acceptability and the technological permeation of English are evidences of its march of civilization in Africa, America, Asia and Australia. Where is its historical locale; what methods is it adopting to traverse mountains and valleys, deserts and rivers?; What are the consequences of this continuous march towards making the world a global village which speaks with one voice in political decisions, economic deliberations, and socio-cultural reformations.

1.2 A Brief Historical Account of the English Language

English “was first spoken in England about 1,500 years ago”, Jowitt (2009) (about the 5thC A.D.). Prior to this period, the original inhabitants of the British Isles, (the Isles were afterwards occupied and emerged to be called the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland comprising England, Wales, Scotland (i.e. Britain) and Northern Ireland), were the Celts or the Celtic people, described as ‘the Ancient Britons’, to distinguish them from the modern citizens of Britain, Jowitt (2009). “The Celts [who] spoke their own language, of which little remains in modern English” McCoy (1992), were initially displaced by the Romans in 43AD, and subsequently had their “desirable land seized by the invading bands of Anglo-Saxons, Germanic peoples from northern Europe” consisting of “three main tribal divisions: The Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes”, McCoy (1992).

These invading tribes, according to Yule (2002), “were described as ‘God’s wrath toward Britain”, because, according to Jowitt (2009), either the Celts were exterminated or suppressed via enslavement or “they fled to join their compatriots in the mountainous areas lying to the west of the Island, such as Cornwall and Wales”. This physical disappearance of the Celts from England gave the invaders room to share out the abandoned land: the Angles ruled in Northumbria and Mercia (northern and central England); the Saxons held Wessex (the south west); the Jutes controlled Kent (the southeast), McCoy (1992).

These Angles, Saxons and Jutes had similar language and culture, shared the same pagan religion and clannish social structure. McCoy (1992) “It is from the names of the first two that we have the term ‘Anglo-Saxons’ to describe these people, and from the name of the first tribe, the Angles, that we get the word for their language, *English*, and for their new home, *Engla-land*”, Yule (2002). Jowitt (2009) corroborating Yule (2002), says: “The whole area occupied by the Anglo-Saxons later came to be referred to as ‘Angla-land’ (‘the land of the Angles’, the Angles being more in number than the Saxons), and from this word ‘England’ is clearly derived”.

This period in England witnessed English as a vernacular. The prestigious languages of scholarship, government business and literary writing were Latin and French. Nevertheless, the growth of English dating from this very period was divided into three: Old, Middle, and Modern, marking the evolution of English from old to “the language of today”, Jowitt (2009).

Different writings reflecting this evolution have shown the characteristics of letter symbols of each period: *Beowulf* an epic embodying the exploits of the Scandinavian hero is written in Old English; *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer demonstrates orthographic symbols of Middle English; while scholars, scientists and playwrights like Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson etc displayed modern English orthographic patterns in their writings. The English language in this evolutionary unfoldment was serving the needs of the English people and gradually was being made significant in prestige as the French language and Latin within the borders of England.

However, during the Renaissance (16th C), God-centred universe of the Middle Ages gave way to rebirth or revival or reawakening of learning Greek contributions to the world, “but generally the evolution and application of more rigorous standards of criticism in all fields of learning was witnessed”, Jowitt (2009). He further says that this period witnessed the rise of humanism referred to as “the discovery or rediscovery of the value and centrality of the human....” Along with humanism are “fresh advances in scientific knowledge” carried beyond the level of scientific knowledge attained by the ancient and medieval (including Islamic) worlds”. Similarly significant in relation to the outside world, Jowitt states, is “the overseas expansion of Europe” facilitated by “the sudden growth of European overseas enterprise” made possible “by the invention of compass and by better sailing ships”. These heightened interest in learning, advances in science, and growth of overseas enterprise constrained people to become “interested in travel, adventure and discovery in exotic lands. The imagination of England was stirred by first-hand knowledge of Africa, Asia and the Americas; by knowledge of their cultures, climates, plants and animals”, Taylor (1981).

Jowitt (2009) confirms this spirit of adventure in securing knowledge of the outside world. He says that under Queen Elizabeth I, “first serious attempts were made to promote English trading relations with the non-European world, and to start colonies of English settlers”. The results of these serious attempts were the issuing of a royal ‘charter’ to “the East India Company, founded in 1660 to trade with India...” and the founding of colonies “in North America, one on the Island of Newfoundland, another much further south, in an area named ‘Virginia’ in honour of the Queen”, the virgin queen of England.

It can be noted therefore that the fifteenth century marked the threshold of Renaissance which served as a spring-board for the diffusion of the English language ferrying English culture to Africa, Americas, Asia, Australia where this language is spoken as a native, official or business transaction language. The catalysts gradually but satisfactorily edging the language towards becoming a global language are the next vital consideration of this piece of writing.

1.3 Notable Catalysts for the Spread of the English Language

The English language spoken first in England about 1,500 or 1,600 years ago as a vernacular has metamorphosed into the foremost international language. This meteoric rise to popularity is engendered by a conglomeration of many factors and methods pleasing and displeasing human sensibilities. These factors are economic, political, social and cultural.

The first is trading. Queen Elizabeth I encouraged trading with the Indians and settlements in North America, and “slightly earlier, in the reign of [Queen] Mary, the first contact had been made between English traders and the coastal rulers of Nigeria”, Jowitt (2009). Equiano in *Equiano’s Travels* (1996) relates how he was captured and sold into slavery in 1745. These contacts were not silent trading, but involved the use of language. These European traders had guides and interpreters from the regions visited who were ex-slaves, recaptives or settlers in Sierra Leone and Liberia. This trading relation gave rise initially to a contact language, pidgin, a corrupt intermixture of English and local languages, and finally to full learning and speaking smartering English by the native inhabitants. These new speakers became the envy of their kiths and kin who longed to speak this foreign language to communicate with the Whiteman.

Adiele Afigbo in Okere and Njoku (eds) (2009) corroborating this scenario relates how the Niger Deltans of Nigeria learned the values and language of the English people, became middlemen between the Whites and the hinterland dwellers. They prided themselves on this privilege until these interior dwellers learned this language of communication and by-passed the Niger Delatans and related directly with the English traders at the coast. In this process, the language continued to spread until direct contact was effected via colonialism which institutionalized speaking-reading-writing in grammar schools.

Colonialism marking direct and indirect British administration in Africa witnessed the establishment of institutions – government, commerce, schools, law – which admitted English as the only language of communication. Confirming this unique honour, Nwadike (2008) declaimed this complete rejection of local languages as expressed by the British Chief Inspector of Schools for West Africa, Rev. Metcafe Sunter in 1884 in Lagos.

I regard these said languages (African) as only interesting to the comparative philologist and never likely to become of any practical use for civilization.... The native must and will know English in spite of all well-meaning but diseased notions: it is the language of commerce and the only education worth a moment's consideration.

This brazen suppression of colonized languages has persisted to be the strategy adopted to exclude the governed from their culture or to compel them to think and express themselves in a language not fully lost in them.

Arising from colonialism is Christian evangelism. Christian missionaries secured acres of land for schools where they effectively indoctrinated the natives to European ways of life. Recalling the roles of Christianity in weakening or exterminating what was described as anti-Christian practices, Basden (1921) records the lecture of Sir H. H. Johnston to the Royal Geographical Society (Nov. 12th, 1888):

For its effectual abolishment (anti-Christian practices), which has been of the greatest benefit to the well-being of Europeans and natives alike, we owe our thanks, not to the intervention of Naval or Consular officials, nor to the bluff remonstrance of traders, but to the quiet, increasing labours of the agents of the Church Missionary Society.

The increasing labours of the missionaries were evident upon their desecration and repression of African cultural values as narrated in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the severance of filial pieties and describing Africa as heart of darkness which must be purged of physical darkness as well as spiritual darkness. The missionaries brought Bible and the school; we accepted the Bible with the school, and they took our lands. The lands symbolized our roots generationally maintained via African languages. Today, Christianity and the certificates obtained through this language have made us beat the English tunes and assure ourselves of successful living here on earth and after by keeping to the English social norms spread via the English language.

The theory of high culture and low culture is prejudicial to languages classified as low culture. Waudhaugh (2000) says that prestige is only given to speakers of "a certain few classical languages (e.g. Greek and Latin) or modern languages of high culture (e.g. English, French, Italian, and German)". Little credit is gained "for speaking Swahili, and until recently at least, not much more for speaking Russian, Japanese, Arabic or Chinese". The prestige attached to the English language by Nigerians is succinctly captured by Emecheta (1974), Olagoke in Ubahakwe (ed) (1979) and Tomori in Banjo et al (eds) (1981). Emecheta reports that "an intelligent man [IBO MAN] was judged by the way he spoke English"; Olagoke

avers that “the key to decent employment” and admissions to post-primary and post-secondary schools are predicated on the successful performance in the language, and Tomori observes that the exhilaration in the pursuit, by Nigerians, of acquiring competence in spoken English is the “desire to speak like the Whiteman and to read books in English”. This explains the feverish rush to learn and use English by those who consider their languages as offering limited opportunities.

Also instrumentally significant to the spread of English is what I term the language crisis in many parts of the world especially Nigeria. Elugbe in Emenanjo (ed) (2004) quoting Handford et al (1976) says that “the best, most documentary compilation of a list of Nigerian languages now contains 394 entries, approximately 400”. None of these languages is acceptable as a national language, even though the Federal Government, by fiat granted “the status of ‘national languages’ to Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in so far as they have large constituencies in Nigeria”, Elugbe (2004). These languages have no “official status at the Federal level”, he stresses, as broadcasting, newspaper and magazine houses, legislative businesses, educational instructions, government policy executions, motley political crowd during campaigns, international relations and business transactions, scientific reports and implementations are carried out in English.

No ethnic group would prefer the relegation of its language to the projection of another; thus ethnic suspicion and minorities’ marginalization became rife. To avert these possibilities, English has come to stay. This echoes a poet’s outburst as quoted in Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*; “water, water everywhere but none to drink”. Language, language everywhere but no one to be used. It is therefore unnecessary to look far in identifying why English should not be rooted in such sovereign entities bereft of language choice for formal government business.

The end of the Second World War in 1945 also marked what Hutchinson and Waters (1987) describe as “the demands of a brave new world”. The United States came out of the War economically and technologically super powerful. The domination of technology and commerce “generated a demand for an international language. For various reasons, most notably the economic power of the United States in the post-war world, this role fell to English”, they report. To relate with this new world power, her language must be learned.

The effect was to create a whole new mass of people wanting to learn English,... because English was the key to the international currencies of technology and commerce... -businessmen and -women who wanted to sell their products, mechanics who needed to keep up with developments in their field and a whole range of students whose course of study included textbooks and journals only available in English. All these and many others needed English and, most importantly, they knew why they needed it.

Similarly fundamental to the acceleration in the need for English is “the Oil Crisis of the early 1970s, which resulted in a massive flow of funds and Western expertise into the oil-rich countries”, Hutchinson and Water (1987). Western experts could not function effectively where languages of neither the partners were intelligible, and so, “English suddenly became a big business”. The natives were gathered, taught, and recruited into the oil business as clerks, messengers, interpreters, security operatives, technicians and supervisors. Today, the hysteria to relate with the States or be in union with the States in language has resulted in the majority of the world swallowing hook, line and sinker anything coming out from the West.

Equally basic in the spread of the language is development in Information Communication and Technology (ICT). English orthography and phonetic symbols are the major linguistic elements used in configuring messages in computers. Understanding GSM and other internet sites requires the knowledge of the English language.

Another recognizable process of the English language spread is extermination of language speaking communities. Millar (2007) reports that

this happened to the Yahi people of California in the nineteenth century, who were massacred – shot to death – by white settlers who coveted their land. The last surviving sixteen Yahis fled into the desert, where all but one of them died from cold, hunger, and disease, still knowing not a word of any language but Yahi. On a larger scale, it happened to the entire indigenous population of Tasmania. After the British arrived on the Island in 1830, they found the Tasmanians to be an inconvenient obstacle to their plans for settlement, and so they took vigorous steps. The Tasmanians were ordered out of most of their own territory, and British soldiers were authorized to shoot Tasmanians on sight. By 1830 only 200 Tasmanians remained alive; these were rounded up and placed in a kind of concentration camp. Where, denied medical care or adequate food, they eventually died. The last to die was an old woman who reportedly spoke not one word of English.

This gory tale shows how the British, by subterfuge, bribery and ghastly means, overran many of the territories speaking the English language today.

1.4 Consequences of this Spread

The English language, above all other languages like French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, according to Millar (2007), has

been successfully transplanted into vast swathes of the globe, where [it has] become the first languages of hundreds of millions of people on every continent and the everyday second languages of hundreds of millions of people on every continent and the everyday second languages of hundreds of millions more. In the process, [it has] already exterminated many hundreds of indigenous languages, and this process is accelerating all the time. Hundreds of other surviving languages have to be reduced to insignificance and are struggling for survival, often vainly.

This extermination or reduction to insignificance facilitates the adoption of English, by many of these speech communities, as its lingua franca to ease communication within and across communal boundaries.

Throwing light on the adoption of English as a lingua franca (ELF), Barbara Seidlhofer in Hornby (2005) says:

In consequence the current usage of English is being shaped at least as much by its non-native speakers as its native speakers. ELF is thus not dependent on British, American or Australian socio-cultural norms, nor is it governed entirely by what native speakers of English would regard as ‘normal’ or ‘idiomatic’ language use.

Explaining further the background influences of these new Englishes, she observes that “the forms that ELF takes are usually influenced by various factors, including the linguistic and cultural background of its speakers”. In being influenced by various factors, she says “that ELF takes many different forms, but despite this, successful communication through ELF clearly does occur in millions of interactions everyday

and all over the world”. These successful interactions suggest that “there must be a significant common core of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation that makes this possible”, she emphasizes.

The language is no longer the exclusive possession of Britain, nor is it to all other nations using it as native language, because “there are numerous varieties of the English language, and what we ordinarily mean by ‘English’ is a common core or nucleus which is realized only in the different forms of the language that we actually hear or read”, Quirk & Greenbaum (2000). These new Englishes or ELF is “... an example of how any language varies and changes as it is appropriated by different communities of users. As this development is described and recognized, features of ELF will inevitably find their way into future dictionaries of current English”, Barbara in Hornby (2005).

Another consequence of the spread of English culminating in the existing varieties having affiliation to the common core is its international or globalizing cohesion, and coherence in international or global and national confabs: Professor Kurath in Archibald Hills (1969) underscores the indispensability of English in facilitating world-wide communication and one-voice posturing.

In countries that came under British political and cultural domination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Standard English inevitably became the medium of communication in public affairs and the instrument of instruction in schools. In all parts of the world speakers of English read the same literary and learned publications and listen to much the same talk on radio and television. The world-wide essential uniformity of literary and of cultivated spoken English is a powerful factor in maintaining cultural ties between continents and in facilitating concerted action in times of crises.

1.5 Conclusion

The continents of the world use English either as a native or second or foreign language. This interaction is seen in commerce, religion, politics, technology, foreign relations, and intra ethnic communications. The pervasive tendencies of this language are determined by trade contact, imperialist suppression, pitiless Christian evangelism, high-low culture theory, techno-commercial turning point of 1945, language crisis, and development in information technology (ICT). Today, over 70 countries use it as official or semi-official language, and it plays a significant role in many more, Hornby (2005). It is therefore incumbent upon anyone, after going through the chequered history of the language in its near suppression and domination by French and Latin, and its meteoric springing out to be a foremost world language, to assert that *one-voice trend of the English Language is really a globalizing mission* of making “different cultures and economic systems around the world” become “connected and similar to each other because of the influence of large MULTINATIONAL companies [the British Isles] and of improved communication” (globalization: Hornby (2005)).

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