



The new linguistic order



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Abstract: The globalisation phenomenon that we are currently seeing has led to major linguistic changes on a worldwide scale. English has become the leading international language, in economic and political spheres, and is becoming the language of high society and of the young. At the same time, however, regional languages are also making considerable headway, thanks to new social interaction and economic backing from their governments. In turn, and as a result of these two trends, there is impetus for feelings of belonging to local communities which see their language as a sign of their own authenticity, one that has to be defended against the phenomena of globalisation and regionalisation. We are thus heading towards a multilingual society, in which each language has its own, distinct social functions, even though it is inevitable that there will be conflict between the languages that come into contact. In this scenario, the author predicts a loss of hegemony for English, in favour of regional languages, and the future extinction of the least spoken minority languages.

1. Preface

As you read this sentence, you are one of approximately 1.6 billion people —nearly one-third of the world's population— who will use English in some form today. Although English is the mother tongue of only 380 million people, it is the language of the lion's share of the world's books, academic papers, newspapers, and magazines. American radio, television, and blockbuster films export English-language pop culture worldwide. More than 80 percent of the content posted on the Internet is in English, even though an estimated 44 percent of online users speak another language in the home. Not surprisingly, both the global supply of and the demand for English instruction are exploding. Whether we consider English a "killer language" or not, whether we regard its spread as benign globalization or linguistic imperialism, its expansive reach is undeniable and, for the time being, unstoppable. Never before in human history has one language been spoken (let alone semi-spoken) so widely and by so many.



With unprecedented reach comes a form of unprecedented power. Although language is synonymous with neither ideology nor national interest, English's role as the medium for everything from high-stakes diplomacy to air traffic control confers certain advantages on those who speak it. Predominantly English-speaking countries account for approximately 40 percent of the world's total gross domestic product. More and more companies worldwide are making English competency a prerequisite for promotions or appointments. The success of politicians around the world also increasingly depends on their facility in English. When newly elected German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and French president Jacques Chirac met in September to discuss future cooperation, they spoke neither French nor German, but English. And English is the official language of the European Central Bank, despite the fact that the United Kingdom has not joined the European Monetary Union, the bank is located in Frankfurt, and only 10 percent of the bank's staff are British. The predominance of English has become such a sore point within the European Union that its leadership now provides incentives for staff members to learn any other official languages.

Yet professional linguists hesitate to predict far into the future the further globalization of English. Historically, languages have risen and fallen with the military, economic, cultural, or religious powers that supported them.



Beyond the ebb and flow of history, there are other reasons to believe that the English language will eventually wane in influence. For one, English actually reaches and is then utilized by only a small and atypically fortunate minority. Furthermore, the kinds of interactions identified with globalization, from trade to communications, have also encouraged regionalization and with it the spread of regional languages. Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, and a handful of other regional tongues already command a significant reach and their major growth is still ahead. Finally, the spread of English and these regional languages collectively —not to mention the sweeping forces driving them have created a squeeze effect on small communities, producing pockets of anxious localization and local-language revival resistant to global change.

2. Love thy neighbor's language

English came to Massachusetts the same way it did to Mumbai: on a British ship. For all the talk of Microsoft and Disney, the vast reach of English owes its origins to centuries of successful colonization by England. Of the 100 colonies that achieved independence between 1940 and 1990, 56 were former British colonies and 1 was an American possession. Almost every colony that won its independence from England either kept English as an official language or at least recognized its utility.

The continued spread of English today is both a consequence of and a contributor to globalization. Some factors are obvious: the growth in international trade and multinational corporations; the ever widening reach of American mass media; the expanding electronic network created by the Internet; and the linguistic impact of American songs, dress, food, sports, and recreation. Other factors are perhaps less visible but no less powerful, such as the growth in the study of English overseas and the swelling number of students who go abroad to study in English-speaking countries. In 1992, almost half of the world's million-plus population of foreign students were enrolled at institutions in six English mother-tongue countries: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Yet globalization has done little to change the reality that, regardless of location, the spread of English is closely linked to social class, age, gender, and profession. Just because a wide array of young people around the world may be able to sing along to a new Madonna song does not mean that they can hold a rudimentary conversation in English, or even understand what Madonna is saying. The brief formal educational contact that most learners have with English is too scant to produce lasting literacy, fluency, or even comprehension. Indeed, for all the enthusiasm and vitriol generated by grand-scale globalization, it is the growth in regional interactions —trade, travel, the spread of religions, interethnic marriages— that touches the widest array of local populations. These interactions promote the spread of regional languages.

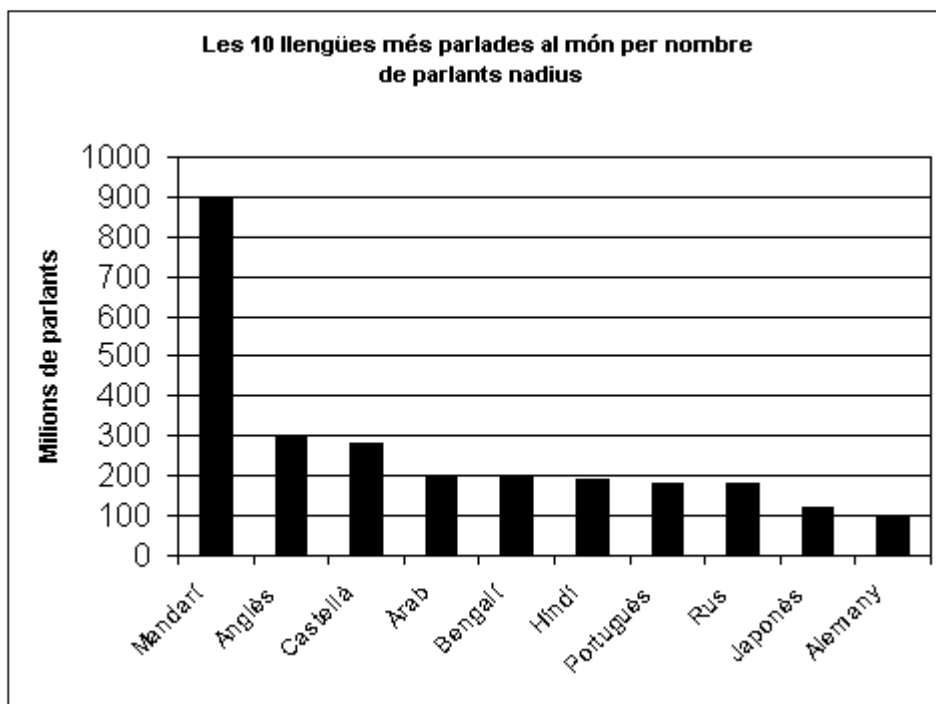


Consider the case of Africa, where some 2,000 of the modern world's approximately 6,000 languages are spoken and 13 percent of the world's population lives. English is neither the only nor even the best means to navigate this linguistic obstacle course. Throughout East Africa, Swahili is typically the first language that two



strangers attempt upon meeting. The average East African encounters Swahili in a variety of contexts, from the market, elementary education, and government "how to" publications, to popular radio programming and films. New movies from India are often dubbed in Swahili and shown in towns and villages throughout Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. In West Africa, some 25 million people speak Hausa natively and perhaps double that number speak it as a second or third language, due in large part to burgeoning regional commerce at local markets throughout the region. Since most Hausa speakers are Muslim, many of them also attend Koranic schools where they learn Arabic, itself a major regional language in North Africa. Thus, many Africans are trilingual on a functional basis: local mother tongues when among "their own", Hausa for trade and secular literacy, and Arabic for prayer and Koranic study. Hausa speakers firmly believe that Hausa has great prospects as a unifying language for even more of West Africa than it already reaches. Its main competition will not likely come from English but rather from other regional languages such as Woloff—which is also spreading in markets in and around Senegal—and Pidgin English.

Increased regional communication, informal market interaction, and migration are driving regional language spread around the world just as they are in Africa. Mandarin Chinese is spreading throughout China and in some of its southern neighbors. Spanish is spreading in the Americas. Hundreds of varieties of Pidgin English have emerged informally among diverse groups in Australia, the Caribbean, Papua New Guinea, and West Africa. The use of French is still increasing in many former French colonies, albeit much more slowly than at its peak of colonial influence. Hindi is reaching new learners in multilingual, multiethnic India. And Arabic is spreading in North Africa and Southeast Asia both as the language of Islam and as an important language of regional trade.



Some regional languages are spreading in part due to the efforts of organizations and government committees. France spends billions of francs annually to support French-language conferences, schools, and media that promote French as a vehicle for a common French culture. Muslim organizations in the Middle East spread knowledge about Islam worldwide with an extensive array of English pamphlets and other literature, but they cultivate their ties with each other in Arabic. Moreover, in promoting Islam within their borders, many governments seek to Arabize local ethnic minorities (for example Berbers in Morocco and Christians in Sudan). The German government funds 78 Goethe Institutes, scattered from Beirut to Jakarta, that offer regular German language courses as well as German plays, art exhibits, lectures, and film festivals. Singapore, a tiny country with four official languages, is in the nineteenth year of its national "Speak Mandarin" campaign. Singapore designed the campaign to encourage dialect-speaking Chinese to adopt a common language and facilitate the use of Mandarin as a regional tongue.



The importance of regional languages should increase in the near future. Popular writers, itinerant merchants, bazaar marketers, literacy advocates, relief workers, filmmakers, and missionaries all tend to bank on regional lingua francas whenever there is an opportunity to reach larger, even if less affluent, populations. In many developing areas, regional languages facilitate agricultural, industrial, and commercial expansion across local cultural and governmental boundaries. They also foster literacy and formal adult or even elementary education in highly multilingual areas. Wherever the local vernaculars are just too many to handle, regional languages come to the fore.

3. Home is where the tongue is

For all the pressures and rewards of regionalization and globalization, local identities remain the most ingrained. Even if the end result of globalization is to make the world smaller, its scope seems to foster the need for more intimate local connections among many individuals. As Bernard Poignant, mayor of the town of Quimper in Brittany, told the Washington Post, "Man is a fragile animal and he needs his close attachments. The more open the world becomes the more ties there will be to one's roots and one's land".

In most communities, local languages such as Poignant's Breton serve a strong symbolic function as a clear mark of "authenticity". The sum total of a community's shared historical experience, authenticity reflects a perceived line from a culturally idealized past to the present, carried by the language and traditions associated (sometimes dubiously) with the community's origins. A concern for authenticity leads most secular Israelis to champion Hebrew among themselves while also acquiring English and even Arabic. The same obsession with authenticity drives Hasidic Jews in Israel or the Diaspora to champion Yiddish while also learning Hebrew and English. In each case, authenticity amounts to a central core of cultural beliefs and interpretations that are not only resistant to globalization but are actually reinforced by the "threat" that globalization seems to present to these historical values. Scholars may argue that cultural identities change over time in response to specific reward systems. But locals often resist such explanations and defend authenticity and local mother tongues against the perceived threat of globalization with near religious ardor.



As a result, never before in history have there been as many standardized languages as there are today: roughly 1,200. Many smaller languages, even those with far fewer than one million speakers, have benefited from state-sponsored or voluntary preservation movements. On the most informal level, communities in Alaska and the American northwest have formed Internet discussion groups in an attempt to pass on Native American languages to younger generations. In the Basque, Catalan, and Galician regions of Spain, such movements are fiercely political and frequently involve staunch resistance to the Spanish government over political and linguistic rights. Projects have ranged from a campaign to print Spanish money in the four official languages of the state to the creation of language immersion nursery and primary schools. Zapatistas in Mexico are championing the revival of Mayan languages in an equally political campaign for local autonomy.

In addition to invoking the subjective importance of local roots, proponents of local languages defend their continued use on pragmatic grounds. Local tongues foster higher levels of school success, higher degrees of participation in local government, more informed citizenship, and better knowledge of one's own culture,



history, and faith. Navajo children in Rough Rock, Arizona, who were schooled initially in Navajo were found to have higher reading competency in English than those who were first schooled in English. Governments and relief agencies can also use local languages to spread information about industrial and agricultural techniques as well as modern health care to diverse audiences. Development workers in West Africa, for example, have found that the best way to teach the vast number of farmers with little or no formal education how to sow and rotate crops for higher yields is in these local tongues. From Asturian to Zulu, the world's practical reliance on local languages today is every bit as great as the identity roles these languages fulfill. Nevertheless, both regionalization and globalization require that more and more speakers and readers of local languages be multiliterate.

4. Looking ahead (I)

Since all larger language communities have opted to maintain their own languages in the face of globalization, it should come as no surprise that many smaller ones have pursued the same goal. If Germans can pursue globalization and yet remain German-speaking among themselves, why should Telegus in India not aspire to do the same?

Multilingualism allows a people this choice. Each language in a multilingual society has its own distinctive functions. The language characteristically used with intimate family and friends, the language generally used with coworkers or neighbors, and the language used with one's bosses or government need not be one and the same. Reading advanced technical or economic material may require literacy in a different language than reading a local gossip column. As long as no two or more languages are rivals for the same societal function, a linguistic division of labor can be both amicable and long-standing. Few English speakers in India, for example, have given up their local mother tongues or their regional languages. Similarly, in Puerto Rico and Mexico, English is typically "a sometime tongue", even among those who have learned it for occupational or educational rewards.



There will of course be conflict, not to mention winners and losers. Language conflict occurs when there is competition between two languages for exclusive use in the same power-related function—for example, government or schooling. Most frequently, this friction occurs when one regional or local language seeks to usurp roles traditionally associated with another local tongue. In the Soviet era, Moscow took an aggressive line on local languages, instituting Russian as the sole language of education and government in the Baltics and Central Asia. In the 1990s, however, many of these states have slowly deemphasized Russian in schools, government, and even theaters and publishing houses, in favor of their national tongues. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have passed the strictest laws, placing education, science, and culture within the exclusive purview of their national languages and (until just recently) leaving ethnic Russians out in the cold.

Even though local and regional regimes are most likely to use language for political ends, global languages (including English, the language of globalization) can also foster conflict. France's anxiety over the spread of English is well documented. The government in Paris forbids English in advertising and regulates the number of English-language films that may be shown in the country. A cabinet-level official, the minister of culture and communication, is responsible for monitoring the well-being of the national tongue. The Academie francaise, France's national arbiter of language and style, approves official neologisms for Anglo-American slang to



guard the French language against "corruption". Yet French schools are introducing students to English earlier and earlier.

Those who speak and master the languages of globalization often suggest that "upstart" local tongues pose a risk to world peace and prosperity. Throughout most of recorded history, strong languages have refused to share power with smaller ones and have accused them of making trouble—disturbing the peace and promoting ethnic violence and separatism. Purging Ireland of Gaelic in the nineteenth century, however, did not convince many Irish of their bonds with England. Those who fear their own powerlessness and the demise of their beloved languages of authenticity have reasons to believe that most of the trouble comes from the opposite end of the language-and-power continuum. Small communities accuse these linguistic Big Brothers of imperialism, linguicide, genocide, and mind control.

5. Looking ahead (II)

Globalization, regionalization, and localization are all happening concurrently. They are, however, at different strengths in different parts of the world at any given time. Each can become enmeshed in social, cultural, economic, and even political change. English is frequently the language of choice for Tamils in India who want to communicate with Hindi-speaking northerners. Ironically, for many Tamils—who maintain frosty relations with the central authorities in Delhi—English seems less like a colonial language than does Hindi. In Indonesia, however, English may be associated with the military, the denial of civil rights, and the exploitation of workers, since the United States has long supported Jakarta's oligarchic regime. Although English is spreading among Indonesia's upper classes, the government stresses the use of Indonesia's official language, Bahasa Indonesia, in all contact with the general public. Local languages are denied any symbolic recognition at all. The traditional leadership and the common population in Java, heirs to a classical literary tradition in Javanese, resent the favoritism shown to English and Indonesian. Spreading languages often come to be hated because they can disadvantage many as they provide advantages for some.

English itself is becoming regionalized informally and orally, particularly among young people, because most speakers today use it as a second or third language. As students of English are increasingly taught by instructors who have had little or no contact with native speakers, spoken English acquires strong regional idiosyncrasies. At the same time, however, English is being globalized in the realms of business, government, entertainment, and education. However, Hindi and Urdu, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, and vernacular varieties of Arabic can all expect a boom in these areas in the years to come—the result of both a population explosion in the communities that speak these tongues natively and the inevitable migrations that follow such growth.



The smallest languages on the world scene will be squeezed between their immediate regional neighbors on one side and English on the other. Most purely local languages (those with fewer than a million speakers) will be threatened with extinction during the next century. As a result, many smaller communities will not only seek to foster their own tongues but also to limit the encroachments of more powerful surrounding languages. Even in a democratic setting, "ethnolinguistic democracy" is rarely on the agenda. The U.S. government was designed to protect the rights of individuals; it is no accident that its founding fathers chose not to declare an



official language. Yet given the vocal opposition to Spanish-language and bilingual education in many quarters of the United States, it seems not everyone holds the right to choose a language as fundamental.

What is to come of English? It may well gravitate increasingly toward the higher social classes, as those of more modest status turn to regional languages for more modest gains. It might even help the future of English in the long run if its proponents sought less local and regional supremacy and fewer exclusive functions in the United Nations and in the world at large. A bully is more likely to be feared than popular. Most non-native English speakers may come to love the language far less in the twenty-first century than most native English speakers seem to anticipate. Germans are alarmed that their scientists are publishing overwhelmingly in English. And France remains highly resistant to English in mass media, diplomacy, and technology. Even as English is widely learned, it may become even more widely disliked. Resentment of both the predominance of English and its tendency to spread along class lines could in the long term prove a check against its further globalization.

There is no reason to assume that English will always be necessary, as it is today, for technology, higher education, and social mobility, particularly after its regional rivals experience their own growth spurts. Civilization will not sink into the sea if and when that happens. The decline of French from its peak of influence has not irreparably harmed art, music, or diplomacy. The similar decline of German has not harmed the exact sciences. Ancient Greek, Aramaic, Latin, and Sanskrit —once world languages representing military might, sophistication, commerce, and spirituality— are mere relics in the modern world. The might of English will not long outlive the technical, commercial, and military ascendancy of its Anglo-American power base, particularly if a stronger power arises to challenge it. But just because the use of English around the world might decline does not mean the values associated today with its spread must also decline. Ultimately, democracy, international trade, and economic development can flourish in any tongue.

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