

The *ET column* is where we ask people in the know – academics, broadcasters, educators, linguists, teachers and others connected with English worldwide – to write a column for the journal on issues of controversy, debate, work in the field, and matters of topical and immediate interest.

Globalization and the spread of English: what does it mean to be Anglophone?

In this issue, SALIKOKO S. MUFWENE wonders whether English is becoming as universal as is often claimed?

So much has been published over the past decade about the extent to which world-wide globalization (see below) has spread English into a “global language,” i.e., one spoken all over the world. Much of this evolution can be attributed as much to the prescription of English as a second or foreign language in secondary schools of almost every country of the Outer and Expanding Circles today as to its usage as the primary lingua franca of business, navigation, science and technology, and academia.

Demand for English and American language centers has actually increased around the world, and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is now administered regularly in many metropolises. To ensure that their students are competitive, economically affluent countries have invested lots of money in the latest audio-visual technology while also recruiting the most competent teachers of English as a second or foreign language. South Korea has stood out in contracting American and British teachers to provide interaction-with-native-speaker experience to its students via satellite while European countries have benefited greatly from student exchange programs that enable their students to improve their competence by immersion in native socio-economic ecologies. Equally noteworthy are financial and emotional sacrifices endured by many, chiefly Korean, families whose mothers/wives and school-age children live in Anglophone countries so that the children can develop native competence in English. The relevant parents assume that as the world-wide market value of English continues to rise, every young per-

son anywhere will need it, at least as a lingua franca, and the more fluent ones will have a competitive edge over their peers. Pop culture will undoubtedly have contributed its share to this rise of its market value.

On the other hand, how comprehensive and accurate is the above description? Is the world Anglicizing really as fast and/or globally as some language activists fear? There are noteworthy facts that cannot be ignored. For instance, in most countries of the Outer Circle, the proportion of actual speakers of English remains very small (at best between 20% and 30% of the total population), although the proportion of children graduating from secondary school has increased substantially since Independence. An explanation for this apparent paradox is that opportunities for practicing English remain urban and associated with white collar jobs, which represents a very small proportion of the national job market. Although English is the medium of education in secondary schools, it plays a marginal role in the extra-curricular lives of most students. Attrition of their competence in



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this “foreign language” seems guaranteed after graduation.

Féral (2007) also observes in the case of Cameroon that although English and French are both official languages, its economic and political capitals, Douala and Yaoundé, respectively, are in the Francophone area. The population living in the Anglophone area, near Nigeria, remains a minority. (The other neighboring countries are almost all Francophone!) Although English is a compulsory subject in secondary school, the proportion of students commanding it well by the time of graduation is very small. French remains the dominant foreign lingua franca, competing locally with Pidgin, the popular English-based lingua franca.

Worth mentioning here is also South Africa, where English has competed with Afrikaans since the late 18th century and appears to have put the latter at risk, although it is spoken by about 6 million people (according to the 2000 census) and is the only other official language that is empowered by modern economy. Afrikaans is hardly attracting learners from outside the Afrikaner and Colored communities. Moreover, more and more Afrikaner and Colored children are being raised bilingual in English and Afrikaans (Broeder *et al.* 2002, Giliomee 2003), which may augur a gradual shift to monolingualism in English especially in the city (just like in North America and Australia), although Afrikaans remains a *sine-qua-non* asset in the rural areas of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Gauteng, and the Cape provinces.

South Africa stands out on my mind because it also contradicts the claim by, for instance, Crystal (2000, 2004) that English is taking over the world as a global/universal language. Indeed, young South African Blacks and Coloreds rioted in the 1970s for the right to education in English, the alternative that then, as now, opens doors to the outside world. Yet, as I traveled in the country recently, I was struck by the fact that English usage is still very much an urban phenomenon associated primarily with a socio-economically privileged class. Is English really becoming as global as it is claimed to be? To language activists I ask, which languages is it displacing outside North America and Australia? Certainly not the indigenous vernaculars of South Africa and similar places around the world (Mufwene, 2008).

Isn’t the alleged (increasing) world-wide currency of English overrated? As a visiting professor at the National University of Singapore in autumn 2001, I wished I spoke Malay too. I had to rely on pictures and gestures to order my lunch at most of the eateries on campus. Visits to Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong brought me in contact with cab drivers that did not speak English. In 2005, my wife and I missed our destinations twice in Taipei because neither of us speaks Putonghua. Few bus drivers speak English; and we had no reason to expect

them to! Naturally, English was even less useful to us when we ventured into a traditional market place in search of low working class cuisine. We had a similar experience in Japan in 2007, including not being able to order a good meal in a Kyoto popular restaurant, because no waiter/waitress spoke any English at all and we could hardly communicate linguistically with the only one who tried to help. Fortunately, one can rely on the picture displays in Japan’s restaurants or the look of what the tourists at the next table had just ordered and seemed to like.

Can we count on getting by with English in some countries simply because we have encountered several students and professionals from there who speak (some) English? These individuals may not accurately reflect the distribution of English speakers in their homelands. And I have plenty of personal anecdotes in this regard. When I attended an international meeting of Academia Sinica in Shanghai in September 2008, rare were Chinese professors, many of them highly distinguished scholars, who admitted that they spoke some English. To be sure, a few of them may simply have been too shy to test their competence. (There was a graduate of Yale University who simply refused to speak it – perhaps because we were in her home country and the onus was on us to speak the local language, hers!) I had problems understanding the student guide who met me at the airport, though he was very helpful in checking me smoothly into my four-star hotel, because there was no English-speaking attendant at the front desk that evening. On the other hand, I am grateful some waitresses in the hotel’s restaurant spoke English. (I could not count on this luck in the restaurant of Academia Sinica’s hotel restaurant in Tapei!) Likewise, many pedlars in Shanghai’s old town speak (some) English, enough for them to entice tourists to buy their goods. A few days later, I was speaking at a meeting of the Japanese College English Teachers. The dominant language of the conference was Japanese, which was the right thing to do, because it would be so artificial for Japanese English teachers to communicate with each other in English, when they can interact more naturally and perhaps even more efficiently in their own vernacular. The problem was mine for not speaking Japanese, instead of forcing them to listen to my plenary paper in English. On the other hand, they had invited me!

If you think that I was facing an Asian singularity toward their guest, I have more to tell you. While visiting Belo Horizonte, Brazil in July 2009, I barely ordered my lunch at a snack bar where I ventured without my host (of course because I had not taken a crash course in Portuguese), just an hour or so after I had felt frustrated with buying a jacket I fell in love with in a clothing store. If you attribute my experience to the fact that Belo Horizonte is perhaps not so cosmopolitan, I can testify

to a similar one in Rio de Janeiro a couple of days later, in a store in Copacabana, one of its most touristic neighborhoods, where, months before, I had been lucky enough to buy a stylish felt hat. Unfortunately, the young lady who had attended to me before was not there this time.

A lesson to learn from the above anecdotes is that English is not spreading uniformly everywhere, least of all as a vernacular. Therefore, it is not endangering all languages everywhere, in both the Outer and Expanded Circles, especially when its new users decide when to use it and when not to. Another lesson is that the geographical expansion of English is constrained by whether or not particular individuals find it useful in their personal, local lives, regardless of its dominant role in world-wide business, navigation, and science and technology. As explained in Mufwene (2008), language learning is an investment in time and energy, and in some cases a financial one too. Although more and more students are learning English in high school, they are not all equally invested in it, and many are those who forget it as quickly after graduation as they do most of the other subjects they learned that bear marginally on their daily lives.

Even if we choose to interpret globalization, partially, as the fact that various parts of the world are now more interconnected and interdependent economically, we should not overlook the fact that some parts are more equal and interconnected than others, nor the fact that the interdependences are often more asymmetrical than symmetrical. To borrow from Blommaert (2010), some parts of the world are closer to the centers while others lie in the periphery. The spread of English is very much constrained by these inequities, aggravated by many more at the level of national or local socio-economic structure, to which the term *glocalization* can apply.

English is spreading less widely in places with a low glocalization index (Mufwene in press), as not every citizen can afford to travel far and wherever they want, nor can everyone interact with travelers from outside or consume imported goods, including foreign languages. In fact, nor is everybody interested in consuming cultural imports from out-

side. Affordability and positive disposition to cultural imports are thus very important factors that bear on the spread of English. Although English has become a global language geographically, it is not becoming a universal one, a fear mitigated by its speciation into so many varieties, some of which have already been disfranchised as separate languages, viz. creoles and pidgins.

These latter observations raise the question of who counts as Anglophone? This is germane to the question of what country counts as Anglophone. What demographic or ethnographic criteria should a territory meet to qualify as Anglophone? For instance, what proportion of its population, with what level of competence, would justify characterizing it as Anglophone? Does frequency of usage count for especially non-native speakers? I can of course raise more issues on this subject matter, but there is only so much space for a column! Hope we can think over the above issues before carrying on the same traditional discourse on the spread of English and the endangerment of other languages without double-checking the facts. The factors that bear on the vitality of particular languages, major and small, appear to be very local, and the effects of world-wide globalization seem to depend so evidently on those of glocalization. ■

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